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Western Trails

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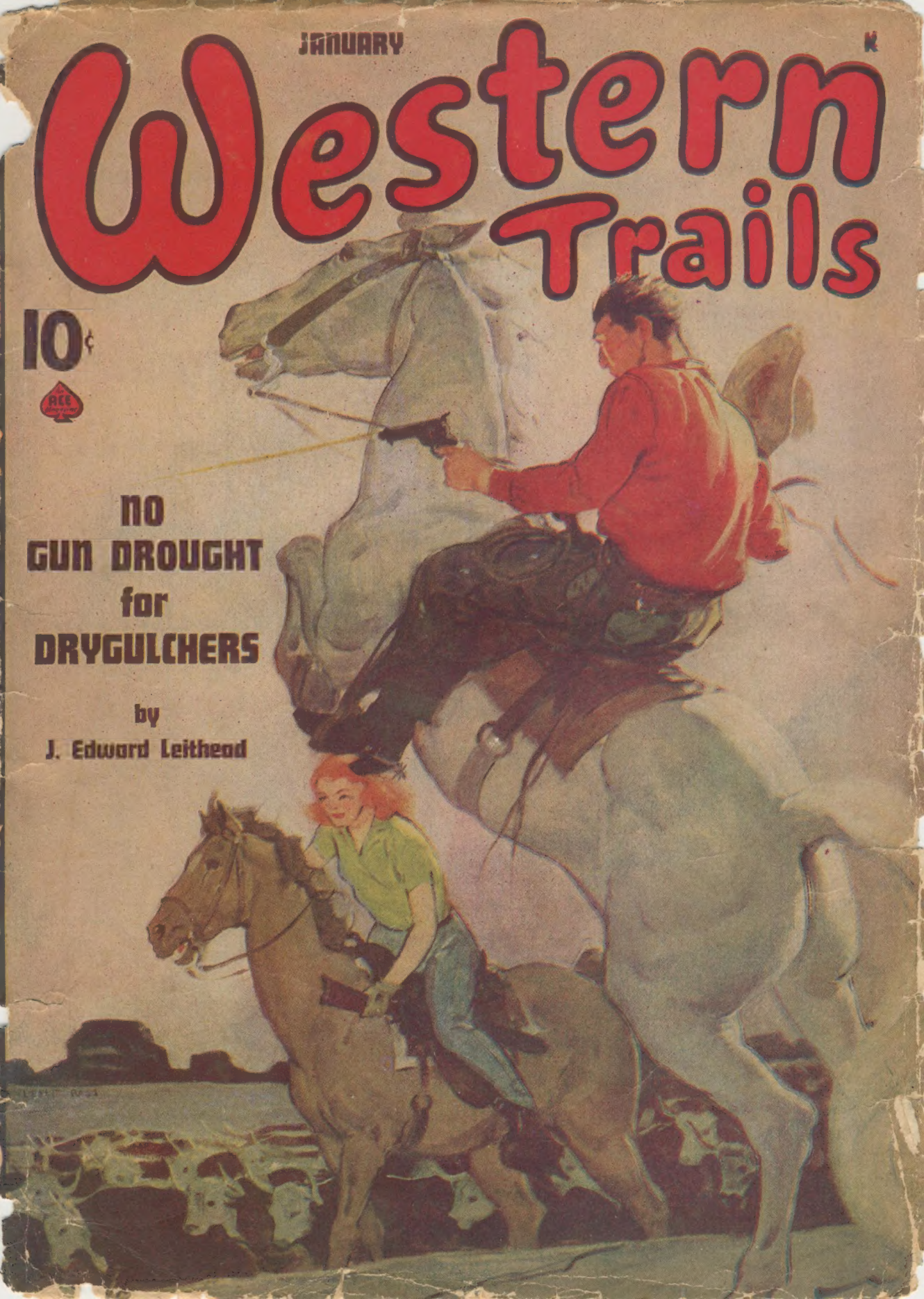
NO GUN DROUGHT for DRYGULCHERS

by

J. Edward Leithead



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Western Trails

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No Gun Drought for Drygulchers

Exciting Novelette

Avery Patchin, young ramrod of the Tumbling J, thought he had a sure-fire scheme to save the ranchers' thirst-crazed herds. But long-loopers were out to rustle them. And Patchin was forced to bring on a leadstorm to quench drygulch greed.

By J. Edward Leithead

CHAPTER I

RIDING the south pasture of Tumbling J, Avery Patchin saw sights that turned his cowman's heart sick. He had counted twenty-one dead steers within the hour, but the buzzards, on the ground and on the wing, defied enumeration. It was midsummer and had scarcely rained a drop on that range since spring. A man could fight stock thieves, grass fires and blackleg with hope of success, but he was powerless against the weather.

Esau Baxter, for whom Patchin rodded the Tumbling J, was even worse off than his neighbors. They were located along the Pipestone River, while Esau was back in the hills, dependent on a creek and a few waterholes which had all but turned to gumbo. The Pipestone itself was a thin trickle, the lowest it had ever been in the memory of the oldest cowman.

Long and limber in the saddle, with sweat turning his tawny hair and wool shirt dark, Avery jogged toward a draw between two hills, grimly certain that he would find more cattle down on the far side. The smashing echo of a Colt gun, the short bellow of a steer, made him swing spurred heels. His lips thinned below aquiline nose, he dropped the reins to jerk gun and insert a sixth cartridge in the chamber under the hammer. The

outfit was losing cattle enough by means beyond control without some cow killer adding to the toll.

Slashing through the brush-choked draw, Patchin saw a horseman in battered Stetson and faded levis coming toward him. At the end of a lariat, hitched to the stranger's saddle, the gaunt body of a steer dragged in the dust. Avery's sudden appearance stopped the cattle shooter, but he kept his hand clear of his gun, displayed a yellow-fanged grin as the foreman rode up, Colt tilted.

"What's the idea?" barked Patchin, scanning the leathery face, with its restless eyes and sun-bleached, oxbow mustache.

"Pardner," said the other, "me and my sidekicks are hungry. You wouldn't drill a feller 'cause he beefed a steer for food, would you? I was draggin' the carcass to yonder tree, to butcher it in the shade. You the boss of this outfit?"

"Cow boss," said Patchin. "Where're your friends?"

"The other four's lookin' for a critter," replied the man. "Live ones seemin' scarce, we split up to hunt."

"Call 'em in," Patchin said sharply. "before they kill another beef. One's all we can spare just now. Nobody's ever been turned away hungry from Tumblin' J, but with the range burnin' up, cattle droppin' down every day, we can't afford to be too open-handed." He shoved his gun in the scabbard. "What's your name?"

"Seth Skerritt," said leather-face. "The boys'll have heard my shot and be in directly, knowin' I've got meat. We're goin' farther north to look for work, since nobody'd be hirin' men on a range caught in the middle of a drought. If you don't catch a spell of rain soon, there won't be nothin' but hides and bones hereabouts to harvest, pardner."

"You said it, Skerritt," Patchin nodded grimly. "Drag that steer under the tree, if you want, and get busy. Meat spoils quick in this weather."

"Don't I know it?" retorted Skerritt, touching up his horse. "That's why we passed up the critters already dead."

AVERY, wheeling his mount, kept pace with him. They halted by the wilted-looking dwarf oak, close to the draw. Skerritt, dismounting, drew a skinning knife. He slit the steer's throat to drain off the blood while he removed the hide. Patchin sat watching him until a voice, youthful but menacing, spoke from the near-by hillside.

"I'm coverin' your back, cowboy! Don't move!"

Skerritt lunged to his feet, waving the bloody knife. "It's all right, Toby! This hombre ain't objectin' to us eatin' his beef. Where's the rest of the bunch?"

"Comin', I reckon," replied Toby. He was sliding down the hill before Patchin, turning his head, caught more than a flashing glimpse. But he reappeared in a moment, leading a horse around the base of the hill. He was a youth not out of his teens, tough-looking, but his beardless lips split in a smile as he passed Avery.

"Some hot," he remarked, dropping the reins. "Give you a hand, Seth?"

Patchin saw no reason to linger. "I'll ride on, Skerritt, and make sure your friends don't kill an extra beef. Where'd they head, Toby?"

The youngster swept an arm southward, and Patchin rode that way. But he didn't meet anyone. Not until he had completely circled the south pasture and was well on his way to the home ranch, did it occur to the cow boss that Toby might have purposely misdirected him. Probably they were cowhands, though it was possible they were longriders who didn't care to be seen and marked for later identification. Skerritt and Toby hadn't been able to escape observation. Avery shrugged. If trouble developed, he knew what two of the bunch looked like.

A half mile out from headquarters, he saw two riders at the little round pen he had built with his own hands to make an experiment. Patchin answered the upflung hands of the pair as they spied him coming up the range. He rode a little faster.

"Avery," greeted Esau Baxter, whose huge white mustache overhung a steel-trap mouth, "you're wastin' your time

tryin' to make a cow horse out of that there palomino. Good to look at, but—"

"Dad, I think you're wrong," Loretta Baxter spoke up. "If Avery hadn't his hands full from daylight to dark with this awful drought, he'd be working cattle with the palomino right now."

Patchin rested smiling eyes on the girl. He never got tired of looking at Loretta, of hearing her voice, which was like the flowing melody of a mountain stream. She had a sunbrowned loveliness that was heightened by colorful garb, pearl-gray, low-crowned hat, Navajo beaded vest, whipcord riding skirt and star-topped half boots.

"Loretta," said Avery, "that palomino may be a one-man horse, but I think I'm the man when I get time to win his confidence." He turned to look at the handsome animal, standing at the far side of the pen. "Whoever owned him first must've treated him brutal, makin' him hate the sight of a man."

Baxter snorted. "He's only killed five of 'em! I'd sure had him shot, Avery, if you hadn't asked for a chance to try your hand. Regular snakehead. Lets you saddle him before he turns himself loose. If you ever get to use him on the range, you won't be able to fire a gun. The sound of one makes him go hog-wild."

Avery nodded. "I figure his original owner must've been a gun-tosser. Well, I'm not one, though I have to do a bit of shootin' now and then. Which reminds me of the fellows I met up with in the south pasture."

His boss listened with sharpened interest. "We don't want any rustlers hangin' around," said Baxter. "Range has been pretty free of 'em the past few years. Keep your eyes skinned for that bunch. If somebody started stealin' now, it wouldn't take long to finish us."

"I was headin' for Cedarville tonight, anyway," declared the foreman. "Be a good idea to tell Sheriff Frisbie and any of the neighbors who happen to be around, so they can be on the watch, too."

BY NINE o'clock that night, Patchin had passed the word in the Jughandle Saloon, where the cattlemen of the district had congregated to discuss the jackpot they were in. Burly Sheriff Frisbie, leaning back against the bar, said it would almost be a relief to hit leather after some rustlers, get out on the range where he couldn't hear the doleful talk of famished herds thinning out, becoming food for the buzzards.

"I'll go loco if I have to listen to much more of it," said the peace officer. "Action—that's what I want! I can settle a cow thief's hash by burnin' powder, but I can't bring rain to save cattle. What's that?" he broke off suddenly as the pounding of hoofs and the rattle of wheels penetrated to the smoke-hazed barroom. "Sounds like the stage that went out an hour ago!"

He broke for the door, with Avery Patchin at his side. Behind them crowded the other patrons. The six-horse Concord cycloned out of starlit darkness south of town, roared through the main street at gradually diminishing speed until the driver, lying back on the reins, brought it to a stand before the Jughandle. The shotgun messenger, a crimson bandage around his head, got shakily down from the box. The sheriff and Avery put forth hands to steady him while he told the tale of a holdup.

"Happened just where the road skirts the southeast corner of Tumblin' J. Five in the gang, and they took me by surprise, it's so long since there was trouble on this run. They got the strongbox, worth plenty, but I downed two of the bandanna-faces. Rest disappeared on Baxter's land. Havin' no passengers, I figured if we made a quick run back and got a posse—"

"I'll take it from here," Frisbie interrupted the messenger. "Somebody'll help you to the doc's office. You can't ride." He turned to Patchin. "Looks like your range drifters pulled this. Maybe you should've watched 'em a little closer, but I ain't findin' fault since we're gettin' the action we all crave."

"There's a good chance they returned to the camp on our range," said Avery. "Had some beef there they might want to take along and won't hardly be ex-

pectin' a posse before mornin'. I'll lead you to the draw."

Avery ran to the hitchrack, untied his horse. Other cattlemen and cowboys followed pell-mell, eager for the chase, which would make them forget their troubles temporarily. There was some delay while Sheriff Frisbie went after his mount. Riding back to the saloon, he looked over the posse and suddenly barked:

"You goin' along, too, Smoke?"

The man he addressed, heavy-set, with a long, horselike face and flinty eyes, nodded quickly. "Why not, Frisbie?"

"Never knew you to ride in an owlhoot hunt," replied the sheriff. "Too likely to be pals of yours. But we can't saddle this holdup on you because you've been in the Jughandle all evenin'."

"And you'll never saddle nothin' on me," stated "Smoke" Morey coldly. He fraternized with a certain element around Cedarville whose means of livelihood was open to question.

Headed by the sheriff and Patchin, the posse roared out of town. At the scene of the holdup, an unfenced section of Tumbling J land bordering the stage road, lay two stark bodies. Patchin, getting down and striking a match, quickly identified Toby, but the other man he didn't know. He climbed back in the saddle and led westward for the draw.

"We won't go too close horseback," said Sheriff Frisbie, checking his mount a little later. "No cover to speak of, and if they're still there and hear us, they'll have time to slope. Dismount here, men, and ring the draw."

Saddle leather creaked and the possemen separated. Avery found himself walking alone, taking advantage of every shadow cast by the sparse brush. Nearing the draw, he discerned the dwarf oak beneath which Seth Skerritt had butchered the steer. He dropped down and crawled, and his straining gaze detected movement by the tree. In the same instant he caught the faint thud of hoofs. The horses were going toward the draw. The stage robbers had discovered the stalking posse and were stealing away.

Avery jumped up and broke into a run. "They're headin' through the draw!" he yelled, and thumbed his Colt hammer. None of the possemen had had time to reach the north side of the draw; the way was open for the owlhooters in that direction. A couple of six-guns blazed answer to Patchin's shot and hoofs drummed up echoes in the draw bottom. Their flight detected, the longriders no longer attempted a silent retreat. The guns of other possemen spurted redly; booted feet slammed the hard-baked ground in a race for the draw. Patchin held the lead, although he had but little hope now of stopping the getaway.

Thirty paces from the draw-head, Avery was startled by a shot on his left. He flopped down, though the bullet had just grazed him. One of the gang, for some reason, hadn't fled with the others.

CHAPTER II

SHOOTING from a ground rest, Patchin sent his slugs toward the foot of the tree, where the lone owlhooter was posted. But the foreman didn't seem to hit the target, for the bandit's gun answered steadily. Counting the shots, Avery heaved up when he thought the other's weapon must be empty. A snarling bullet nearly finished him and he dropped back, just as the puffing sheriff crawled up from the rear.

"Here, Frisbie," Patchin said in a low tone, "keep that fellow busy while I slip around behind him. He ain't back of the tree, but he's sheltered somehow and got more'n one gun."

Sheriff Frisbie flattened with a grunt, opened fire. Patchin slithered off, his chaps rasping along the ground. The slight sound shouldn't betray him, with guns crackling intermittently, but he feared the sharp eyes of the bandit. The only cover was scattered sage clumps, and Avery was ready to flip up his gun the instant a bullet came his way. He passed between the tree and the left-hand hill flanking the draw, swerved and wormed his way another ten yards. The outlaw was before him, crouched behind the carcass of the steer killed that afternoon, matching shots with Frisbie and

several possemen who had joined the sheriff.

"Drop that cutter!" snapped Patchin.

The road agent stopped shooting, turned with painful slowness. "I've dropped 'er. Only one more bullet anyhow. Sounds like my friend, the foreman."

"Skerritt, eh?" Avery raised his voice to let the sheriff know it was all over, stepped past the tree to squat beside the owlhooter. "Well, Skerritt, you sure put it over on me. What's the reason you didn't ride off with your pals? Pretty costly holdup, with only two gettin' away."

"I'm bad wounded," replied Skerritt. "Couldn't hang on my bronc after we reached here, followin' the stickup. That messenger could pump lead, all right. We didn't expect our tracks'd be picked up till daylight. But you'll never run down the pair that escaped, 'cause they've got my horse to carry the express money." He chuckled. "Anyway, I won't die of starvation. The steaks we cut off that steer were prime, and the rest of the carcass helped me stand you fellers off, givin' the boys a long start."

Avery couldn't help admiring the road agent's gameness. "You ought to be in better business, Skerritt."

Frisbie and some of the possemen came clumping up. The sheriff had sent the others back for the horses, hoping yet to overtake the outlaws who had sloped. Somebody kicked a pile of brush together and put a match to it. As it blazed up, Seth Skerritt was a gory sight, peppered with buckshot. He grinned at the ring of angry faces.

"Hardly worth capturin', gents, after that shotgun guard got done workin' on me. But I lasted long enough to keep my gun and the extry one the boys left me goin' like triphammers."

"Where they headin'?" demanded the sheriff harshly.

"I ain't tellin' you nothin', tin-star!" Skerritt retorted.

"If he ain't goin' to be any use to us, Frisbie," hollered a grizzled cowman, Dee Simcoe, "we'd just as well stretch him! Here's a hangtree, and we'll have a rope soon's the horses come up."

Other cowmen roared approval, and the sheriff said, "Do what you like with him. I'm more interested in catchin' the fellows that got away with the express money."

Eager hands reached for the bandit propped against the steer carcass. They were withdrawn hastily as a Colt glinted in the firelight, backed by Avery Patchin's slitted eyes.

"Protectin' a prisoner is the sheriff's job," he cracked out, "but if he wants to wash his hands of it, I'll take up for Skerritt. He's bad hurt and may die anyway, but he's entitled to a fair trial if he lives. Get that, Dee and you others?"

"Danged if he wouldn't shoot us for that scalawag!" exclaimed Simcoe.

The sheriff looked abashed. "Patchin's right, boys. You can take the prisoner back to town, Avery. We won't need you to trail the other owlhooters."

Horse-faced Smoke Morey, standing by the fire, said sourly, "If I'd made that play to save the bandit, you'd be claimin' I was a pal of his. But Patchin gets away with it."

The horses arrived. Skerritt didn't utter a sound as Avery lifted him across his saddle and got up behind to hold him on.

IN SILENCE they traveled back to Cedarville, and Avery brought the doctor to the jail. The medico probed for the buckshot, said that Skerritt would probably survive, and departed. Only then did Skerritt speak.

"Hope I can do somethin' for you someday, Patchin."

Next morning, the posse returned empty-handed. In due time Seth Skerritt, nearly well of his wounds, was tried and sent to the State pen for a twenty-year stretch. He had refused absolutely to betray his pals. It didn't seem likely he would ever be able to repay Patchin for standing between him and a hangnoose.

Still there was no rain, no cloud in the brassy sky the size of a man's hat. The water was all but gone, and the cattle

that hadn't died went staggering around with tongues protruding. It looked like curtains for the cow spreads, but nobody thought of staying away from the big dance at Dee Simcoe's ranch. Esau Baxter, as he donned his store-clothes that evening, summed up the die-hard spirit of the range with the remark:

"It won't bring the rain to set home and worry. If the drought has us beaten, we'll take it with our chins up."

Patchin drove the cattleman, his wife and daughter in the carriage. The cowhands trailed along on horseback. It was a gay gathering at Simcoe's, with a Mexican string band furnishing the music. An outsider would have thought the ranch folk hadn't a care in the world. Sheriff Frisbie came with a party of townspeople.

Avery danced with Loretta, then eager cowpunchers cut in, for Baxter's daughter was the most popular girl there. Patchin stepped out to the yard for a smoke. He didn't notice the sky had clouded over, but, as he scratched a match to light his quirly, he felt a drop of moisture on his hand. He dropped the match, threw back his head, and more drops splashed on his face. He sprang up the veranda steps and shouted through the lighted doorway:

"Rain!"

The word electrified the company. The music ceased as men and women crowded onto the veranda, some overflowing into the yard. Beginning gently, the rain increased to a downpour. It was welcomed by clamoring voices, men standing with faces upturned to the pelting drops, heedless of a drenching. They were wild with joy, for it meant the salvation of the range. Women shrilled for their men to come in before they were drowned, but for a time none of them paid any attention.

When Avery finally stepped back on the veranda, Loretta clasped his arm, her eyes glowing.

"Take care," he warned, "You'll spoil your dress."

But she clung to his dripping coat sleeve. "No matter, Avery, it's so wonderful to hear rain again, to know the stock is soaking it up. If it only lasts long enough to fill the streams and waterholes."

"Looks like an all-night rain," said Patchin. "It'll do a sight of good and I don't want to be a kill-joy, but the Tumblin' J, for one, will still have hard goin', it's lost so many cattle."

While they lingered there, two horsemen galloped through the rain toward the ranch house. One shouted, "Where can we put up the broncs?" Patchin directed him to a shed back of the house, where there might be room for two more horses. Wondering who the men were, Avery and Loretta waited for them to come back. The man who had hailed Avery was swearing over the wetting as they reached the veranda.

"Don't cuss the rain, friend," said Patchin. "We sure needed it, and there's a lady here."

"Sorry," said the man, bowing to Loretta. "I'm Mace Antrim. This is my partner, Ike Boggs. We're stockmen from up Wyoming way, lookin' for a ranch to buy. We heard about the drought down here, thought we might be able to pick up an outfit cheap if anybody was goin' out of business. Figured we couldn't lose in the end, because it would rain sometime."

"No cowman I know of was goin' to sell out," said Avery. "And now that it's rainin' I don't believe there's a chance for you to buy."

THE four of them were walking doorward. As they came into the light, Patchin scrutinized the newcomers. Antrim was a six-footer, with a rather thin brown face, his mustache neatly trimmed. Boggs was shorter, older by several years, red-faced and cold-eyed. Antrim said in a disappointed tone:

"Looks like we came just too late, then. We have some money to invest. In Cedarville, they told us we'd find all the cowmen at the Simcoe ranch dance. No sign of rain when we started, and we figured drought-ridden stockmen wouldn't mind mixin' business with pleasure." His eyes shifted to Loretta. "I apologize for the mule-skinner language, Miss—"

"Loretta Baxter," introduced Avery. "Her father owns the Tumblin' J. I'm Patchin, the ramrod."

"Glad to know you both." Antrim removed his wet coat, hung it, with his hat, on a homemade clothes tree near the door. "If Miss Baxter don't hold the cussin' against me, I'd admire to have the next dance with her."

Loretta smiled. "They're beginning a waltz, Mr. Antrim. Let's go."

As she glided off with Antrim, Ike Boggs snickered, "My partner works fast. Where at they servin' the drinks, Patchin?"

Avery gave him a cold look, then pointed, "Out back, Boggs."

Boggs shuffled away and Avery continued to stare after him. The foreman hadn't changed his position when Esau Baxter approached, asking who the strangers were. A little later, Loretta came seeking the old cowman, with Mace Antrim in tow. The girl's face was flushed with excitement as she introduced the newcomer and Avery wondered what was up.

"Dad," said Loretta, "I've been telling Mr. Antrim that this rain is only a respite as far as we're concerned, that we'll need money to build up a new herd."

"That's right," said Baxter. "My losses are greater than my neighbors' because my creek and waterholes dried up soonest. They're on the river front. I'm not sure how many of my cattle will be fit for market, and before I sell 'em off in the fall, I ought to have stockers to replace them. But I haven't the money for a new herd. I was thinkin' some of my friends might help me when they get on their feet, but I dunno. If the price I get for the older stock is what I expect, I could pay back what I borrowed for the new bunch.

"You won't sell out?" asked Antrim.

"No," said Baxter. "I'll pull through somehow."

Antrim smiled. "Your daughter said you wouldn't. Since my partner and I have little chance of buyin' a brand and want action for our money, we could lend you up to ten thousand for a herd of stockers on, say, a sixty-day note at the prevailin' rate of interest. That would make it fall due after shippin', when you've been paid for your old beef herd. I'll have to talk it over with Ike, but I reckon he'll agree."

"Isn't that splendid, Dad?" exclaimed Loretta.

Esau scrubbed his chin, for a moment at a loss for words. "Why, yes," he said finally. "It would solve all our problems. What do you think, Avery?"

Patchin had listened in stony silence. He didn't like Antrim and his partner, though he couldn't put a finger on the reason for it. Not wishing to advise Baxter to turn down the offer, he said:

"It's all right, I guess, but if anything happened to the cattle so you couldn't meet the note, you'd lose ranch and range, everything."

Antrim's eyes clouded an instant, then he laughed. "What could happen to the cattle, man? More drought? Stealin'? It's a fair business proposition, but if Mr. Baxter don't like it, maybe some other cowman would be glad of a lift."

Esau said quickly, "I'll sign the note if your partner agrees, Antrim. Where is he?"

"He asked where the likker was bein' served," said Avery, "so I reckon he won't be hard to locate."

CHAPTER III

BEFORE the rain stopped the parched range had been thoroughly soaked and the streams were overrunning their banks. It revived cattle that were on their last legs. The dry and dead-looking flora of the region perked up. Cattlemen and cowboys rode forth to count the cost of the protracted drought, and though it was high beyond their expectations, they sighed in relief that it was over at last.

Tumbling J had suffered the most, but its hopes for a full recovery were bright. Antrim and Boggs had taken Baxter's note for ten thousand to purchase stockers. The cattle were shipped in from a distant range untouched by the long spell of dry weather.

After the new herd had been re-

branded, Avery Patchin had some time to devote to the taming of the outlaw palomino. He had visited the animal daily, finally coaxing it to take lump sugar and apples from his hand. The first time he tried to ride it, the palomino scraped him off against the fence of the round pen. The second and third trials had the same result. But Avery was gratified that the horse didn't attempt to jump him with striking hoofs after he was thrown. Since its killing hatred of other riders had not flared up, he knew he was making progress.

But Avery's success with the palomino was overshadowed by another matter. Mace Antrim and Ike Boggs, who had taken up quarters in Cedarville, were frequent visitors at Tumbling J. Antrim took Loretta riding or driving several times a week. Once, when she had returned from a trip and Antrim had departed for town, Avery overtook the girl as she was walking to the ranch house.

"Have a good time?" he asked.

She turned, a little surprised at his tone. "About as usual, Avery. We passed the round pen, and Mace saw the palomino for the first time. He admired the animal, said it would be worth a lot to a rodeo show, that there must be somebody who could stay on it."

"I've been givin' every spare minute to the bronc," said Avery, "and I'll soon be able to ride him. But he's a one-man horse."

"I always said you could tame that outlaw!" exclaimed Loretta, but she noticed that Avery didn't smile. "Why so glum? I know! You don't like my riding so much with Mace."

"I have no strings on you, Loretta. But I—well, I don't trust Antrim or his partner. I can't tell the reason exactly."

"The loan they made Dad has helped us out of a hole, Avery. The least I can do is to be friendly to Mace. But—" Loretta laid her hand on Patchin's arm—"I'd much rather go riding with you. Does that make you feel any better?"

"A lot," said Avery, his smile coming quickly.

He had some range work that needed his attention the next morning, but around noon he headed for the round pen for another session with the outlaw bronc. There were several horses outside the corral, a group of people inside, and smoke was rising from a branding fire. Patchin plied his spurs.

As he drew alongside the pen, Esau Baxter straightened up with a hot iron in his hand. The palomino lay hogtied, with a Tumbling J cowhand seated on its head. On the upturned flank of the horse were burned crudely formed letters that Patchin, in his anger, couldn't make out at first. As he flung from the saddle and entered the gateway, Loretta, pale around the lips, stepped between him and her father.

"Don't go off the handle, Avery," she begged. "Look there!"

Patchin, following her pointing finger, saw a prostrate figure on the ground. The man's skull was smashed. "Who is it?" asked Avery.

"Dad says it's Pete Bicknell, a friend of Smoke Morey's," replied Loretta. "We found him as he is, and a strange horse tied to the fence. There was a rope on the palomino. Evidently Bicknell was trying to steal your horse when the outlaw jumped him."

Esau Baxter wagged the branding-iron. "If the fellow hadn't been a horse thief, I'd 'a' shot the bronc, Avery. That's the sixth man he's killed. Risk your life foolin' around with him if you want, but I've branded the outlaw so that everyone will know what he is and keep away from him."

PATCHIN strode past the girl to look at the struggling horse. The word *MANKILLER* was burned in its glossy hide. For a moment Avery was very near to quitting Baxter. But he thought of Loretta and couldn't.

"A fine mess you've made of that bronc's hide," he growled. "Didn't Loretta tell you I've been workin' on him, got him almost ready to ride?"

"She did," admitted Baxter, "but he won't be safe for no one else."

Loretta had come close to Avery, seeing how overwrought he was. "I begged

Dad not to brand him, but in time it will become dim."

Patchin, swallowing his wrath, said, "Yes, Loretta. Now, everybody get out of the pen while I let him up. Carry out Bicknell. I wonder who sent him to steal that horse?" He looked round at the girl. "Remember what Antrim said about the palomino bein' worth a lot to a rodeo?"

"You think he hired Bicknell to run him off?" Loretta stared.

"That's fool talk!" snorted Baxter. "Antrim and Boggs have plenty of money without stealin' horses for shows."

"Maybe they wouldn't be above makin' an extra thousand or so by sellin' the palomino. It probably looked like easy money." Patchin's eyes bored into Baxter's. "Don't be surprised if Antrim and Boggs turn out to be enemies, not friends, at the last. If they've been associatin' with Smoke Morey's crowd in town, it won't look well for 'em. I'm takin' in Bicknell's body and askin' a few pointed questions."

"Don't you start nothin' with Antrim and Boggs," warned Baxter.

"I won't promise a thing," replied Avery. "You hate horse thieves as bad as I do."

They cleared out of the corral, all but Patchin, Baxter, and the cowhand carrying Bicknell. Avery went to the palomino and, talking soothingly, removed the hogging strings. He sidled toward the fence as the bronc heaved up, its eyes rolling wildly. But it didn't attack him. Swinging its head from side to side, it trotted away, and Avery made for the gate. He roped Bicknell to the horse he had ridden to the pen sometime during the night and stepped into his own saddle.

"Well, I'm on my way," he said to the little group.

Baxter started to repeat his warning not to mix it with Antrim and Boggs, but Loretta broke in: "I think you've said enough, Dad."

Leading Bicknell's bronc, Patchin hit Cedarville as it was growing dark. The burden on the led horse drew a crowd at once. Sheriff Frisbie had a look at the dead man and listened to Patchin's tale. Having even less use for a horse thief than a cow thief, the lawman was keen to go after Smoke Morey. But Patchin persuaded Frisbie to let him try his hand alone.

"They'll just button their lips if you're around, Frisbie," said Avery. "I want 'em to feel free to talk and maybe go for guns. Have you noticed Antrim and Boggs bein' particular friendly with Smoke's bunch?"

"I've seen them at the bar together and playin' poker," replied the sheriff. "Look in the Jughandle first. I'll be listenin' for shots."

RELIEVED of Bicknell's body, Avery rode on and dismounted at the saloon. There were just three men at the bar, Antrim, Boggs, and Morey, But as he crossed the floor, Avery observed several friends of Morey's at a table, watching him. He must be careful not to turn his back on them.

Antrim was first to turn at the sound of Patchin's dragging spur chains. His face lighted up. "Hello, Patchin! Was it you causin' the excitement out there?"

"Yes," said Avery. "Weren't you interested enough to come out, or did you know too much about it already? I brought the body of Pete Bicknell, who got kicked to death tryin' to steal my palomino last night."

Ike Boggs had turned about, his face whisky-flushed, but Smoke Morey kept facing the back-bar, toying with his glass.

Antrim said, "I hadn't heard about it. You mean the outlaw bucker you're tryin' to—"

Standing sideways, so as not to present a back-target to the men at the table, Avery interrupted sharply, "What other palomino is there round here? A remark of yours concernin' that horse was repeated to me. I was thinkin' you might have had the notion of shippin' the bronc to some rodeo outfit, if Bicknell hadn't failed. You're pretty thick with Morey's crowd, I understand."

It was Ike Boggs, not Antrim, who showed resentment. Boggs snatched out

his gun. In a flash, Avery's hand was filled. But Mace grabbed Ike's wrist, twisted it, and the gun hit the floor.

"Overlook it, Patchin," said Antrim smoothly. "Ike's always touchy when he's drinkin' heavy. Anyway, you have no right to connect us with a horse thief. What I said about the palomino was just a careless remark. You can't make anything out of it. As for Morey and his friends, I don't believe there's any law against knowin' 'em."

Avery laid his glance on Morey's broad back. "Smoke, you ain't sociable tonight. Too sore over your pal bein' kicked to death? I'm the owner of that horse if you feel like takin' revenge."

Morey looked over his shoulder, eyes half lidded. "Somebody's forever tryin' to saddle dirty work on me. Bicknell was no special friend of mine. I wouldn't know how he was spendin' his time. If he made a bobble and got killed, it's nothin' to me, Avery."

Disappointed that he couldn't stir them into some betrayal of guilt, Patchin called for a drink, wiped his mouth, and began a slow march to the door. Morey's friends, still seated around the table, didn't move.

Avery stopped at the sheriff's office on the way out of Cedarville.

"They're sittin' tight," he reported. "Boggs, half drunk, made a break for his gun, but Antrim stopped him. Morey wouldn't take chips."

"Someday he'll overplay his hand," growled Frisbie. "But what do you think Antrim and Boggs are up to besides tryin' to steal the outlaw bronc?"

"Euchre Baxter out of his ranch somehow," said Avery. "It seems funny those fellows should turn up sudden with such a wad of dough and be keen to lend it to a man they didn't know."

There was some further conversation before Patchin left, putting his horse to a swinging trot on the out-trail. For the first mile he kept glancing over his shoulder, not sure but that some of Morey's pals would take after him. He had made fighting talk without getting the reaction he hoped for, possibly because the sheriff was too handy by. But Antrim and Boggs must realize that Patchin would be a stumbling block to any crooked work they had in mind. And the talents of the Morey crowd were undoubtedly to be bought for perpetrating any crime, from theft to murder.

Two miles from town Avery relaxed his vigilance, for he hadn't detected pursuit. He came to a stony-bottomed ford of the Pipestone and started across. Suddenly, he heard a horse cough on the other side. Boulders lined the far bank; he couldn't see the animal or its owner. Avery sensed a bushup. He backed his mount swiftly, reaching for his gun. Flame of a six-shooter split the dark, he heard the bullet drone past his ear. Three more Colts added their fiery blasts to that of the first gun.

Patchin retreated up the bank in a leadstorm, holding his own fire since he knew his enemies were forted among the boulders. Instead of following him, judging that he would be watching for trailers, four of Morey's bad hats must have left town while he was at the sheriff's office, to catch him at the ford. On Avery's side of the stream there were only scattered rocks, none of a size to shelter a man. The brush was thick, but bullets would penetrate it the instant he opened up and revealed his position. Avery swung from the saddle, groped into the brush, pulling his horse along. The guns stopped singing as his enemies lost sight of him.

About sixty yards below the ford, Patchin emerged from the tangle, close to the water's edge. Looping the reins on his saddle horn, he slapped the bronc with his hat and it slid into the river. The animal was a strong swimmer, and as it struck out for the farther shore, Avery flattened on the lip of the bank. The bushwhackers were sure to hear the horse splashing across, but, in the darkness, would not discern that it carried no rider until too late. And there were no boulders for them to dodge behind this far downriver.

Avery caught the rataplan of hoofs on the other side. A bushwhacker yelled, "There he is!" and muzzle-fire spotted the galloping rider for Patchin's quick

gun. He fired and a yell of pain echoed the Colt thunder.

CHAPTER IV

AVERY'S horse, faintly seen bobbing in the river, was no longer a target for the Morey gang's guns. Lead plowed into the bank or chopped the water close to it as the remaining three gunmen centered their fire on Patchin. His second shot brought a rider tumbling from the saddle. The Coltman was so near the edge of the embankment that he fell over it, striking the water with a loud splash. He made a brief struggle before the current swept him downstream. Avery, trading lead with the other two, saw a red-streaking Colt sway down, as if the gun-wielder had been knocked half out of leather. But apparently the man hung on, for the skylined horse, wheeling from the river bank, had a slumped form on its back.

The fourth gunman was burning powder as he beat a retreat. Avery threw a shot at him, his last. Evidently it didn't reach the mark, for the rider pounded on. Lead ceased to rake the bank where Patchin lay. He got up and walked back to the ford, listening to the receding hoofbeats. Crossing the river on half-submerged rocks, he could find no trace of the man he had first shot. The fellow must have been merely wounded and ridden off with the other two. There was no use in looking for the gunman who had fallen into the river. Avery was a little disgusted, having counted on returning to Cedarville with proof of Smoke Morey's murderous operations.

The foreman sought his horse. It had climbed out on the west bank, stood dripping but uninjured. Avery patted the animal's neck, stepped into the wet saddle, and lifted the reins. Esau and his daughter were waiting for him when he turned up at the Tumbling J. Mrs. Baxter had gone to bed. When he heard what had occurred after Patchin left the round pen with the dead Bicknell, the old cowman sat in silence, his shaggy brows furrowed.

Looking grave, Loretta said, "There's something in the wind." Then she added vehemently, "I'll never go riding with Mace again!"

Avery hid a smile. "Men who'll stoop to horse stealin'—and I'm bettin' Antrim and Boggs hired Bicknell through Morey—will do anything crooked. It's the cattle we've got to watch, 'specially durin' roundup. If we lose 'em, we'll be worse off than when the drought hit us."

Esau ran his fingers through stringy white hair. "I'm not sure you're right about them fellows, but we'll keep our eyes open. Roundup ain't far off now, Avery."

On the day the Tumbling J wagons and roundup crew left the ranch, Avery was absent. But he overtook the outfit before they got deep into the range, riding the outlaw bronc. He surprised everyone but Loretta, who was with the party. Even her father had been skeptical that he would tame the man-hating horse.

"You're puttin' him to workin' cattle?" asked Baxter.

"Sure," Avery nodded. "Tried him already."

"It takes you, Avery!" cheered a cowhand; and another yipped and pulled his six-shooter to salute the outlaw-tamer.

But Patchin cried, "Hold it! He still hates the sound of a gun."

In two weeks, every head of Tumbling J stock that had survived the drought was gathered. Only the newly purchased stockers, which were to carry on the brand, were left scattered over the range when the roundup crew strung out the beef herd for the drive to Cedarville. Patchin rode on point. There had been no attempt to run off Tumbling J cattle, either before or during the gather, and he was perplexed. If Antrim and Boggs were playing fair with Baxter, Avery would feel mighty foolish.

MANY herds were traveling the same road to the railroad town. It was a good showing for a range that had been so nearly ruined by drought. Esau Baxter had been in Cedarville for a week or more, arranging for stock cars. He and Loretta met the Tumbling J herd

as it plodded toward the stock pens. While they were talking to Patchin, Antrim and Boggs joined the group.

"Nice-lookin' cattle," commented Antrim.

"I'll have the money to pay off that note soon as Patchin gets back," said Baxter.

Antrim laughed. "Ike and me ain't worryin'."

Patchin gave the partners a curious glance. It began to look as if he had been wrong about them. Or perhaps he had thrown a scare into them and they had abandoned the scheme he suspected.

The Tumbling J herd was the last to be loaded. It was well after dark when the hands laid aside their prod poles, ate hurriedly and followed the foreman to the caboose of the twenty-car stock train. Avery had previously said goodby to the boss and Loretta. As he got aboard he was unaware of figures flattened on the roof of the car.

Dead tired, Patchin and the punchers sat around and smoked as the long drag steamed eastward. Before they were many miles out, all were dozing. They didn't know that men were climbing down the iron ladder of the caboose, assembling on the rear platform. Wolfish eyes peered through eye-holed bandannas at the slumbering outfit. The masked men wore linen dusters to further disguise themselves.

"This oughta make it easier," muttered a heavy-set outlaw. "Glad they left the lights on. Walk soft, boys!"

Patchin's gentle snoring broke off, he came awake with a start, feeling a stealthy hand at his holster. The gun was withdrawn before he could prevent it. Two blued steel barrels rammed his chest. He heard the cursing of his men as they were similarly relieved of weapons. He glared into the slitted eyes behind the guns.

"Where'd you galoots drop from?" Avery snarled.

"Don't throw talk," said the masked man. "Get out on the platform."

The low-pitched voice had a familiar sound. "Smoke, you won't get away with this!" gritted Patchin.

"That ain't my moniker, but I'll sure make smoke if you don't move fast!" the other growled. "We're takin' charge of this here shipment."

Because of the mask and the linen duster, Avery wasn't absolutely sure of his identity. He would have snatched away the bandanna, but he knew that such a move would be his last. Other masked men in the caboose were herding the Tumbling J punchers to the platform. Avery rose and strode ahead of the outlaw. Just as they reached the rear door, a puncher on the platform cried in protest:

"This train must be hittin' forty! I'll break every bone in my body!"

"Rather stop a slug?" retorted a hard voice.

Avery looked round at the man behind him. "You murderin' skunk!"

The outlaw made no reply. He was talking no more than he must. Sounds from the platform indicated the cowboy had gambled on a leap in the dark. More punchers followed him. Finally the man with Patchin prodded him forward. Out on the platform, facing the windy darkness, Avery set his lips grimly and shot into space. He let his body go lax before he landed, far to the side of the right of way.

For a time he lay half stunned, a shrill whistle from the departing train seeming to mock him.

FINALLY, stretching arms and legs, Avery found that he could move them without pain. The spot where he had fallen was loose, sandy soil. Getting to his feet, he back-trailed in search of his saddlemates.

He found them scattered along the road, and not one had been killed, though there were some broken bones, sprains and bruises. The cattle train, fortunately, had been passing through a sandy valley. Patchin walked three miles to a homestead, roused the owner and persuaded him to hitch up a wagon. It was daylight when the cowhands arrived in Cedarville. The injured men were unloaded at the doctor's office. A crowd had gathered, and through it wormed

the station agent, waving a telegram and shouting:

"Here's a wire from Ocotillo, Patchin, statin' that your herd was taken off the cars about two miles this side of the town. Masked men held up the train crew. I was goin' to send this out to the ranch."

Avery took the message and stuffed it in his pocket. "I'll deliver it. No use goin' east again to look for those cattle. They'll be well hid in the hills." He looked at Sheriff Frisbie, who had been one of the first to reach the homesteader's wagon. "Seen anything of Smoke Morey?"

"Didn't see him in the Jughandle when I went for an eye-opener," replied the sheriff, "but get a gun and c'mon."

Avery borrowed a six-shooter, stuck it in his holster and strode off beside Frisbie. They didn't expect to find Morey at the untidy shack he called home. But as Patchin opened the door, the sight that met their eyes made them pitch out guns. Morey was asleep on his cot; several blanketed forms lay on the floor.

"Wake up," yelled Frisbie, "and trot down to the jail!"

Morey raised himself on an elbow, blinking. "Jail! What for?"

He got his answer, sharp and quick, from Patchin. Smoke began to chuckle.

"We had too much valley tan last night and overslept. Don't know nothin' about the Tumblin' J beeves. Try again, boys."

Avery jerked his head at the sheriff, and they went out. "Ocotillo ain't so far from here," said the foreman, "but that they could have got horses there and reached Cedarville before dawn. After cachin' the stock in the hills, that is. I didn't notice Antrim and Boggs in the crowd. "Let's look 'em up."

They didn't have to look far. The partners were coming up the street toward the Jughandle Saloon. Both pretended surprise at seeing Patchin. When he had explained his presence, Antrim said:

"That's tough. Baxter couldn't afford to lose those cattle."

"I reckon you'll start worryin' about your money now, won't you?" said Avery, lancing the pair with steely eyes.

Boggs started to speak, but Antrim dug an elbow in his ribs. "No," said Mace. "It's several days yet till the note's due. You may recover the herd meantime."

Patchin and the sheriff walked on down the street. Avery returned the borrowed six-shooter. He had another at the ranch. Mounted on livery stable horses, the foreman and all the hands who weren't disabled hit out for the ranch. Mrs. Baxter emerged from the back door as they pulled up at the corral. She crossed the yard, almost running.

"Don't tell me something's happened to that beef herd, Avery!" she cried, and looked stunned at his answer. "I reckon it means the finish of Tumbling J. While most everybody was away from the ranch last night, some gang was after the stockers. Pa and Loretta's out now to see what they can find."

PATCHIN didn't wait to hear any more. He spurred his horse into a gallop, the cowboys trailing him hard. When, an hour later, he caught up with Baxter and his daughter, the latter were hazing along twenty head of cattle. Esau stiffened in his saddle at sight of his foreman and hands. He listened grimly to Patchin's bad tidings, then pointed to the cattle.

"That's all that's left of the new herd. While Morey was stealin' the trainload, another bunch of his bad hats cleaned the range. I won't have the money for that note."

"Like I warned you, Antrim and Boggs are behind it," said Avery. "Aimed to get your holdin's from the first. You'll be served with a writ of attachment, Esau, and have to get out."

Baxter's face blazed and he pounded his saddlehorn. "I'll fight 'em, Avery, before I'll be evicted! Will you boys stand by me?"

"We're not quitters," said Avery, "but shootin' won't solve it." He caught Loretta's quick, approving nod. "Time to use our heads."

The day the note fell due, Antrim and Boggs appeared at the ranch, accompanied by the sheriff. Patchin was

in the living room with Baxter, his wife and daughter. Mace opened the ball.

"We heard you had bad luck with both your herds, Baxter, and weren't sure if you'd be able to meet your note."

"I haven't the money," said Esau flatly.

"Well, we don't like to be hard on you," said Antrim, "but it ain't our fault you were rustled. How many cattle and horses have you?"

"Twenty head of each," replied the cowman.

Mace glanced at Frisbie. "I'll let you do the talkin' from here on."

The sheriff cleared his throat. "If it would save you, Esau, I'd resign. There's somethin' smelly about this whole business. But it's my duty to inform you I'll be around in a day or two to attach the ranch and stock for that unpaid note."

Avery was standing close to Baxter, to grab his arm if he went for his shooting-iron. The room was very still, except for the old cowman's harsh breathing. He said:

"All right, Frisbie, you're not to blame. But if I lose the ranch now, I'll get money somehow, later on, and give these crooks a fight to hold it!"

Boggs snapped, "Who's a crook?" But Antrim swung him about, pushed him toward the door, the sheriff trailing at their heels. Esau, watching them from a window, turned at a sudden exclamation from Patchin.

"Boss, seein' those crooks again gave me an idea! If they figured that mankiller bronc of mine would be a rodeo attraction, why wouldn't it work for us? Besides the palomino, we have twenty other horses, the same number of cattle. The boys are good riders, ropers and bulldoggers. We could put on a rodeo, travelin' from town to town. By the end of the season, unless I miss my guess, we'd have more than enough to make a legal fight for the Tumblin' J."

"Get up a show, eh? I never thought of that." Then Baxter shook his head. "We'd have to sneak off with the stock. I don't mind that, seein' that I'm dealin' with thieves. But we'd need cash for tents and equipment. And we couldn't start in winter."

"Not till next spring, of course," said Avery. "But you've got to quit the ranch anyhow. Maybe your friends could pool enough to put us on the road."

CHAPTER V

DEE SIMCOE and the other cattlemen, slowly recovering from the effects of the drought, hadn't much money to lend and but little faith in Patchin's idea. But, for friendship's sake, they scraped together several thousand dollars and agreed to take care of Baxter's horses and cattle through the winter. Avery and the hands ran off the animals from Tumbling J before the sheriff came to serve the writ, and Frisbie made no effort to find them. He did only what he must to aid Antrim and Boggs.

The partners found ranch and range deserted when they arrived to take possession. But as winter came on, bunches of longhorns began to appear on the Baxter range. These cattle bore the Tumbling J brand. Antrim and Boggs claimed to have bought them in Texas, showed bills of sale, and the sheriff could do nothing, although he believed the bills were forged, that the cattle were those rustled from Baxter. Smoke Morey and his pals went to riding range for the new bosses.

In the distant town of Brushwood, Baxter and his family were spending the winter with Esau's brother. Patchin and the cowhands found odd jobs around the town. Avery had brought along the palomino, kept it at the livery stable. It was to be the equine star of the show and he exercised it daily, except in bad weather.

Avery and Baxter made a trip to a Midwest city to purchase tents and circus wagons, while the ground was still frozen. But with the first breath of spring, Baxter's Rodeo Show went into training. The Tumbling J horses and cattle were driven up from winter pasture and put through their paces. The Mexican string band that had played at Simcoe's dance was hired.

Loretta, enthusiastic about the show from the beginning, practiced trick riding. She could also rope a longhorn with unerring skill. Avery was to star in a shooting act, riding a horse that wasn't gun-jumpy. Baxter was a little dubious about the palomino. It was all right to exhibit it as a horse that had killed six men, but Avery planned to offer fifty dollars to any rider in the audience who could stay on the outlaw three minutes.

Avery knew there were plenty of men so vain of their horsemanship that they would fork anything for the chance to show off. There wouldn't be much danger, said Avery, because he would act as hazer, have a short loop ready to rope the mankiller the minute a rider was thrown. He would top off the performance by riding the palomino himself. So Baxter said, "Go ahead."

It wasn't a big show, but it was genuine, and in the first month of its travels money flowed into the ticket wagon. Loretta's riding and roping were applauded vigorously. Avery got a big hand shattering glass balls as he went at a steady lope around the arena. The Tumbling J cowboys risked life and limb at bulldogging and steer riding.

But the big moment came when Avery rode in with the palomino, neck-roped, giving everyone a chance to view the *MANKILLER* brand that Esau had run on the animal in a fit of anger, never thinking that someday people would pay money to see it. An outlaw horse that had killed six men! Having completed the circuit of the arena, Avery stopped in the middle, facing the stands, and offered fifty dollars to the rider who could stick in the palomino's saddle three minutes.

He always got a quick response from long-limbed cowhands. And they always sunned their spurs. Before the palomino could whirl and use its hoofs, Avery made a quick throw and dragged the outlaw away, anchored to his saddle horn. Esau usually stood at the performers' entrance, with a worried look, until the last contestant had retired safely.

SPRING merged into summer and Baxter's Rodeo Show continued its triumphal march. There were no casualties because of the mankiller and the growing fame of the animal drew big crowds. Esau had all he needed to wage a fight for the Tumbling J, return the loan of his neighbors with interest, and more besides, when, with cooler weather setting in, the show arrived in Brushwood. Here they were to give their last performance, then Baxter and Patchin were going to Cedarville, to see about settling up.

The afternoon performance was more than half over, Avery was in the horse tent, putting saddle on the palomino, when he heard a step at the entrance. Glancing around, he saw a leather-faced man with an oxbow mustache peering in furtively. Patchin's boots rustled through the straw used as bedding for the broncs he he came forward.

"They said I'd find you here," said the man. "Remember me—Seth Skerritt?"

"Why, sure," said Patchin, "though you had me guessin' for a minute. I've seen more people the last few months than I ever did in my life before. Say, I thought you went up for twenty years?"

Skerritt grinned. "I didn't like jail none to speak of, so I watched my chance and skipped one day. My bein' here now is to repay you for savin' me from a lynchin' that time. If you don't watch sharp, your show will be busted up this afternoon."

"Who's goin' to do the bustin' and why?" demanded Avery.

"I'd better tell you first," said Skerritt, "that while I was in stony lonesome, I learned through the grapevine where my pals were at. The two that escaped with the express money. Havin' so much in a lump, they decided to invest it in a ranch. There was a drought on then, you recollect, and they figured on gettin' a brand cheap. Then it rained and spoiled that plan. But they hit on another, lendin' money to a cowman in bad straits to buy stockers, aimin' to

steal him blind afterward and get his ranch—"

"You mean Antrim and Boggs were the two holdups that got away?" Avery broke in excitedly. "I knew there was somethin' shady about them before the night of the big rustlin'. If I'd only known they were the road agents!"

"I ain't finished yet," said Skerritt. "I turned up at their ranch, expectin' to hide till the jailbreak had blowed over and share in the profits later. I was their pal, I helped steal the express money that gave 'em their start. But that pair of lobos didn't want me around. Said I was a marked man and I'd get 'em into trouble. And they had other worries besides, havin' learned your rodeo was back from its tour.

"They were afraid Baxter would get the ranch away from them in a court fight so they spread a little poison among the other stockmen. Told them that Baxter was goin' to close his show here instead of comin' to Cedarville, in order to avoid payin' what he owed his friends, and that they'd better come up and demand payment."

"Simcoe and the others ought to know Baxter wouldn't do that," said Patchin indignantly "They'll get their money all right."

"Mace and Ike won't let it be settled that easy," declared Skerritt. "They want the show and everybody connected with it smashed so there'll be no danger of their losin' the Tumblin' J. They're plannin' to do a little gunwork that will get showfolks and cattlemen fightin' before there's a chance for peaceful settlement. Simcoe and his friends are on the way here. Mace and Ike, with Smoke Morey's gang, are a little ahead of 'em. But I beat both parties to fetch you warnin'."

Avery dropped a hand on the road agent's shoulder. "Skerritt, you've squared anything you owed me! We'll rush through the rest of the performance, to have it over before any of them get here. I've got to find Baxter."

Popping out of the tent, Avery spied Loretta as she crossed the lost from the main tent. Hurrying to meet her, he told her of the trouble in prospect.

"I'll find Dad," she said, paling a little, "and have him watch the entrance. You go in for the last act."

Patchin ran back to the horse tent. Skerritt stood where he had left him. Mounted and leading the neck-roped palomino, Avery headed for the arena. There had been no sign of the trouble-makers on the south road when he entered. He intended cutting the act short, but couldn't entirely omit the challenge to local riders or the audience would feel it had been cheated of the best part of the show.

ONE husky cowhand was thrown and another came forward to mount the palomino. He settled into leather and Avery released the mankiller's close-held head. It shot away, pitching and grunting. Patchin followed fast, with rope ready. He had observed Baxter and some of the cowhands stationed at the main entrance. A sudden loud clamor of voices made him take his eyes momentarily from the bucking horse and rider. Simcoe and the other cattlemen were at the entrance, talking excitedly to Baxter. But no guns were in sight. At that moment, men were crawling under the side walls of the arena. Avery didn't see them.

His rope flashed out as the palomino, sunfishing, unseated the cowboy. Avery dragged the outlaw horse aside as the late rider scrambled up and limped toward the stands. A Colt roared on the far side of the arena. Avery felt the wind of the bullet. The palomino squealed and lunged against the lariat, broke free, for Avery's attention had shifted to the gun-wielder. He saw Smoke Morey standing by the front row of seats.

Other men were sliding into view at various points, Antrim and Boggs among them. Smoke triggered again. Gunless, Patchin threw himself along his mount's neck. At that moment the mankiller streaked across the arena, ears flattened and teeth bared. It had gone hog-wild from the powder burning. Smoke fired at the animal, missed, and nimbly dodged its first rush.

A voice, shrill with excitement, reached Avery. Loretta was riding down the arena at top speed, holding his gunbelt in her left hand. He pounded to meet her, seized the belt, and dropped from the saddle.

"Get your father and the boys!" he roared, buckling on the gun. "The whole gang's sneaked into the tent!"

The audience had left their seats, to push toward the exits, fearful of stopping flying lead. Loretta galloped back to the main entrance. The palomino's fighting squeal had never ceased. Avery, as he turned with his gun bared, observed Morey sprawled in the arena. The outlaw horse had run him down. Murderous hoofs lashed Smoke, who writhed an instant beneath them, then lay still.

But Morey's pistoleers, led by Antrim and Boggs, were converging on Patchin. As bullets snarled around him, Avery cut loose. Mace Antrim's legs buckled and he pitched on his face. Ike Boggs, advancing with short steps behind roaring Colt, was next to chin the sod. But Morey's men were getting the range. Avery felt the sting of lead as he continued to rock his gun-hammer.

The palomino, whirling from Morey's lifeless body, went bucking through the firing line, knocking two gunmen off their feet. Striking with its forehoofs, it spread confusion among the bad hats. Avery, emptying his gun, heard rushing booted feet. Over his shoulder he saw

Baxter and the cattlemen, with a sprinkling of cowboys, pelting down the arena to support him. They began to shoot, and the outlaw palomino, its fury increased by several bullet wounds, turned and came pounding back.

AS THE horse drew near him, Avery sprang for the trailing rope, caught it and held on. He was jerked from his feet, dragged several yards before the animal stumbled to its knees.

Inching along the lariat, which had almost cut off the bronc's wind, Avery swarmed into the saddle. Guns were roaring as he jabbed in the spurs, the palomino bucking like mad. But he got it headed for the performers' entrance, checked rein by a show wagon, and tied the snorting horse to a wheel. While he hastily reloaded his Colt, a voice made him look up. Seth Skerritt sat saddle a few yards from the wagon.

"I just wanted to be sure you came through that smokefest, Patchin," he said. "Guess you don't need my help."

"Got plenty of it, Skerritt. They have the troublemakers corralled in the tent. I downed Antrim and Boggs myself."

"They had it comin," nodded Seth. "Well, so-long and good luck."

Avery looked at the retreating back of the bandit, then hastened toward the arena. Powdersmoke was drifting through the open-topped tent, the trigger-twitching had stilled. Baxter and the cattlemen were walking about, glancing at the slack shapes dotting one side of the arena.

"I hear you fellows came to collect your money, Simcoe," Avery called to the grizzled cowman.

Dee faced him with a twisted grin. "Sounds kind of foolish, don't it? I don't know why we listened to Antrim and Boggs. Anyway, we helped clean up the gang. Sorry we missed the show. Esau says you're goin' back to the ranch tonight. You'll find the range well stocked."

"Easy to guess where the cattle came from," said Avery. "But here's somethin' none of us suspected: Antrim and Boggs were two of the holdup men that robbed the stage last year. Surprise you, Esau? The fellow who told me just left the show grounds for parts unknown."

Baxter asked for particulars. Loretta came up and slipped her arm through Avery's.

"Well," said Baxter, "I wouldn't lift a hand to recapture Skerritt if he was standin' in front of me. But I reckon he'll be caught sometime. When Antrim and Boggs saw me talkin' to the boys at the entrance, they probably knew they couldn't stir up trouble between us, so started to bust up the show themselves."

"Is the palomino badly hurt, Avery?" asked Loretta." "I saw blood on him."

"I believe he's all right," replied Avery, "but let's take a look."

They walked out of the tent. The man-killer had quieted, but only Avery could put a hand on him. Examining the wounds, Patchin turned to the girl with a pleased expression.

"Nothin' serious, Loretta. Hadn't it been for this fellow jumpin' Morey while I had no gun, and you fetchin' the old Colt at the right minute, I wouldn't have stood a white chip chance."

"It's all over, at any rate," smiled Loretta. "We had a successful season and a lot of fun, and we'll get the ranch back."

"Yes," said Avery, "and I was thinkin' we might celebrate—by gettin' married. What do you say, Loretta?"

"Is there a preacher in town?" she answered with twinkling eyes.

"That's answer enough," said Avery happily. "We'll go and hunt him up."

Hoosegow Grubstake

By
Emmett J. Powell

A pretty ranch girl shows the law in Blue Bucket a thing or two about how to trap a couple of cowtown crooks.

FUNNY what love will do for a couple of kids. They weren't exactly kids, but you'd think they were the way they acted. Rita, she's my daughter, was twenty, and Hamp, he's the fellow that's in love with her, was twenty-six. Old enough to act like grownups, but they didn't. You'd think they were a couple of moonstruck idiots the way they went around holding hands and kissing each other and just performing in a downright mushy manner.

Rita had been waiting on tables in the dining room of my hotel ever since she got back from school in The Dalles. She did fine, too. She's pretty. I might be a little prejudiced, but not much. Her eyes are real blue. Not blue green or hazel or any of those mixed-up colors. Just real blue. Ever see Crater Lake? That's the color her eyes are. She's got a bunch of freckles tossed all over a pug nose, and red lips that mostly are smiling, and gold hair that sometimes is almost red. When I was raising her I used to think she was redheaded, judging from her temper, but they curried her down a mite in school.

Did I say Rita did fine waiting tables? I meant she did till Hamp showed up, and then she was likely as not to bring in a

pitcher of water and pour it into folks' coffee. What Rita saw in Hamp I don't know. He made a barbed wire fence look real pretty alongside him. Even a juniper post would have looked handsome. His hair was like a clump of bunchgrass that hadn't been eaten down, his nose was long and had a camel hump in the middle, and his mouth reached from one side of his face to the other. But beauty wasn't a standard of a man's worth the way I saw it, and Hamp was the workingest fellow I ever saw.

Well, it ran along that way for weeks with Hamp riding in from his homestead out Injun Creek way every Saturday. When he was in town Rita sat perched on a rainbow with stars in her eyes. After he pulled out Sunday night, she'd be in the dumps with a face as long as a clothesline till he showed up the next Saturday. She'd keep watching till she saw him, and then she'd run out of the hotel and as soon as he got down off his horse, she'd grab him by the neck and kiss him. One time I held my watch on them, and their kiss lasted three minutes and forty-two seconds.

It was awful silly, but sure pretty to look at. Everybody in Blue Bucket looked at it, too. Soon as somebody saw Hamp coming, he'd set up a yell, and the whole population would make a beeline for the front of the hotel. That was three women, eleven men, not counting the gamblers, Ace Villard and Hard Hat Harry that we figured was transients, and sixteen children.

Along about fall Hamp got me corralled behind my hotel desk, and I saw what was coming right away. I guess he was looking forward to the long winter nights on the homestead. Got pretty lonesome out there for a man, all right. He said, "Billdad, me and Rita want to get married. Are you for us or against us?"

I sure did hate to see Rita pull out again. Seemed like she'd been in school all her life, and now soon as she got back she had to fall in love. I kind of hemmed and hawed a little, and looked at him over my spectacles, and knew I was going to say yes, but didn't want Hamp to hear it right away.

RITA was camped behind the door, and when she didn't hear anything out of me but some hems and haws, she made herself conspicuous by marching up and kissing me. Doggone it, when she kisses me, I sure can't say no. It's been that way ever since she was big enough to know what her eyes were for.

So I said, "Sure, I'm for you, Hamp. You take care of this filly. There's times when she's plumb trying, and she's got a way of wanting to run everything, but take it all around, she's something pretty special."

"I know it." Hamp swallowed. His Adam's apple was as big as a Winesap, and now it was bobbing around like a tumbleweed in a whirlwind. "I sure will take care of her."

Rita laughed. She knew she had us bluffed all right. She said, "Don't you worry, Billdad. We'll be in once in a while."

"About twice a year when you run out of supplies," I said.

"We'll pay you even if it is your store," Rita snapped.

Rita always claimed I was so tight that my hair squeaked when I combed it, but I told her it was because of the electricity that was in me.

"When is it going to be?" I asked.

"Next Saturday," Rita told me. "You, as J. P., are going to perform the ceremony and then you'll let us have the bridal suite."

"Sure," I said. "We'll have Mrs. Yerrington bake you the biggest wedding cake this town of Blue Bucket ever saw, and for a wedding present I'll give you a year's subscription to the Blue Bucket Weekly *Times-Herald*."

"That," Rita said, "is even more generous than I expected you to be."

Of course it wasn't really much of a wedding present. When I didn't have somebody else running the Blue Bucket Weekly *Times-Herald*, I ran it myself because the truth had to be printed. The trouble was nothing much ever happened in Blue Bucket. I made it a rule never to put out an issue until enough had happened to fill up the paper, so sometimes it

didn't come out for a month. Makes quite a saving of paper that way.

Rita claimed it was the worst paper in Oregon, and that I always picked up a handful of commas and threw them all over the front page, but it really wasn't that way. I had a system. I put in a comma every fourth word, which Rita could have plainly seen if she'd read the paper like she should.

"You think you'll be ready by next Saturday?" I asked. "Maybe you should wait until spring."

"I'm ready," Rita said firmly. "You just want to keep me waiting on tables."

That was very unjust, but I let it go without defending myself. I said, "I just want to see this done up in style."

"My wedding dress is all made," Rita said.

Then I knew why she'd been so sleepy in the daytime lately. She'd been sitting up all night making her wedding dress. I said, "Sister, you run back into the dining room. Ace Villard and Hard Hat Harry just walked in."

"They can wait. You've got something else on your mind, and I want to be here when you ask it."

Rita's lips weren't smiling now. They were tight set and stubborn, and when they were that way, I knew better than to argue. Hamp would learn that, too.

"All right," I said. "Seems kind of dangerous to be homesteading in a cow country, Hamp. I don't want Rita to get into trouble."

"We won't have no trouble, Billdad," Hamp said. "There ain't a big cow outfit within fifty miles of my place. It's kind o' rough out there all right, but my neighbors ain't the kind that will make trouble."

I cleared my throat. I said, "Maybe you'd better go see about Hard Hat and Ace."

"Go ahead," Rita said stubbornly. "I know what you're going to say."

I CLEARED my throat again. Rita always argued that a woman had a right to know about a man's financial situation, and if she was the right kind of a woman for him, she would help him save his money. That was what the scholars call a moot point between us. I think a woman should stay in the kitchen and attend to the woman's work while a man takes the money and spends it.

There wasn't any use in putting it off, so I asked Hamp, "How are you fixed financially?"

"We'll make out fine, Billdad," Hamp answered. "Won't be long till I'll have my homestead proved up on. My cabin ain't big, but it's tight and we'll keep warm this winter. I figgered I'd put another room on come spring. I've got plenty of water and a patch of alfalfa, and a little herd of whitefaces."

"You ought to have some cash," I said.

"I have." Hamp grinned. When he grinned, his lips lengthened out so you had to look twice if you wanted to see both ends. "I sold some steers last week. I got nine hundred forty-two dollars and thirty-two cents for 'em. Got it buried under the fireplace.

"Buried," I shouted. "Why, you muckleheaded imbecile, that isn't safe. You bring it in here and leave it in my safe."

"So you could loan it out and pocket the interest," Rita said. "No, Billdad. We'll leave it right where it is. When we want it next spring to buy a bull and some heifers, we'll know where it is."

That was a subtle and unjust accusation, but I let it go. "You figure on building up your herd pretty fast," I said.

Hamp nodded. "Yes, and I don't think we'll have to hire a buckaroo for quite a while. Rita says she's as good as any man."

She was, too. When she wasn't waiting on table in the dining room, she was on a horse. She was right handy with a rope, and I've seen her make some rides that would cause a man to swell up and pop with pride.

"All right," I said. "You've got my blessing. We'll tie the knot up in good shape come Saturday. Sister, go see about Hard Hat and Ace."

I married them just like I said I would. I'm justice of peace, and do a real good marrying business. I never had a knot come loose, either. I always made them think they got their money's worth, and

if they quit each other, they'd lose that investment. I always figured folks would have to get mighty mad at each other to lose two dollars.

Everybody was there in the hotel parlor but Hard Hat Harry and Ace Villard. Of course we didn't expect them because they're just transients. They hadn't lived in Blue Bucket more than a year or so. It was a real nice wedding. The three women cried. The eleven men and the big boys all enjoyed kissing the bride. And Rita, say, you should have seen her. She was the prettiest thing you ever saw. There was a faraway look in her eyes, and her white silk dress was plumb nice, and her diamond ring was the biggest one I'd ever seen in Blue Bucket. Hamp ordered it from a catalog, and paid twenty-one dollars and forty-nine cents for it. He didn't get cheated, either.

After it was all over, Hamp gave Rita the longest kiss I'd ever watched. One of the women got so excited she fainted. We opened up the presents then. I gave them a one-year paid-up subscription to the Blue Bucket Weekly *Times-Herald*. I'd already moved the dollar from my right pants' pocket to my left. There were a lot of practical presents: a rolling pin, a potato masher, a Bowie knife, a box of .45 shells and things like that. It was close to midnight before we got done dancing in the dining room.

Next morning they pulled out right after they ate. I told them to get back before snow time, and they promised they would. I went into the dining room and looked around. Rita was the best waitress I ever had, and I hated to see her go. It was downright lonesome. I went into the kitchen and told Mrs. Yerrington she'd have to wait on tables now, too. I raised her wages fifty cents a week, and that pleased her.

I went into my saloon and had a drink, but it didn't taste good. I took a cigar, and it didn't taste good. I sat in on a poker game with Hard Hat Harry and Ace Villard, but there wasn't any fun in it. Not even after I'd won twelve dollars. Harry and Ace seemed a mite sleepy. They must have been real sleepy to let me win twelve dollars.

THERE wasn't anything around but a big bunch of emptiness. I didn't know I'd miss Rita so much. I began wondering if I couldn't fix it so Hamp would quit his homestead and move into Blue Bucket. I wouldn't mind looking at his ugly mug if I had a chance to see Rita once in a while. I was still thinking about it the next day when somebody gave a holler, and I went into the street to have a look. I never saw a more surprising thing in my life. There was Rita and Hamp riding up the road big as life.

I went back to the hotel desk and was pulling away at my cigar when they came in. Rita was smiling and pretty as ever. Hamp was as ugly as he'd been the day before. Rita kissed me, and wanted to know how Mrs. Yerrington was making out.

"Fine," I said.

"I'd like to work in the dining room for a few days. We thought we'd stay in town for a while, and we might as well work our board bill out."

"I'll put my time in cutting wood," Hamp said. "You've got some boards loose on the east side of the barn. I'll fix them. And that roan you've got out there in the corral oughta be broke. I might as well gentle him while we're here."

I wouldn't have been more surprised if that roan horse had walked in and started talking about the price of hay. I said, "Sure. Go ahead. Make yourselves at home."

"How soon does the next issue of the *Times-Herald* come out?" Rita asked.

"Well, I've got the story of the wedding on the front page but not much else has happened. Might be two weeks yet."

Rita nodded. "I'll go tell Mrs. Yerrington I'll give her a hand."

I figured they ought to tell me what had gone wrong without asking questions, but I saw they weren't, so I asked, "What's happened?"

"Why, nothing," Rita said. "That is, practically nothing. We thought you'd like to have us back for a visit."

"Yeah, sure," I said. "You bet."

But Rita wasn't fooling me any. I knew something had gone mighty wrong, or they wouldn't be back in Blue Bucket so

soon after they were married. It went along for two days without me finding out, and I sure didn't aim to ask again. Hamp nailed those boards down, and cut up a young mountain of juniper wood, and rode the roan horse. Rita went to work in the dining room just like she had been, and everything was fine. It sure was fine, only I knew something was wrong, and I almost burned my brain out trying to think what it was.

It was Monday afternoon when they got back. When Mrs. Yerrington opened up the dining room Wednesday evening, Rita wasn't around. Mrs. Yerrington asked, "Do you want me to wait tables tonight, Bill?"

"You'll have to," I said, "until Rita shows up."

It graveled me. Rita didn't have to wait on tables, and she'd said she was going to. I set out to look, and found her and Hamp in my print shop.

"Are you," I said, "or are you not going to wait on tables? It didn't make any difference, but—"

"I'm going right now, Billdad." Rita gave me the kind of smile she used to when she'd got into the hard candy in the store and filled her apron pockets. She picked up some folded papers and started out, Hamp beside her.

"What have you been up to?" I asked.

Hamp looked as guilty as a man could look stealing chickens, and he started to say, "We just ran—"

"Nothing, Billdad," Rita cut in sweetly. "We thought the paper ought to come out sooner than you did."

"Doggone it, that's a waste of paper when you haven't got anything to say," I shouted.

"But we had something to say." Rita went out, Hamp still beside her.

I was really mad then. Or thought I was until I began looking around. I saw that Rita had set up the front page and evidently had run a few off. I was mayor of Blue Bucket, and if something was wrong, I should know it. Besides, I was Rita's father, and I figured that gave me the right to know what was happening. Then when I ran off the first page and had a look, I was really mad.

BIG headlines about a robbery on Injun Creek were on the front page. The money Hamp had hidden under the fireplace was gone, nine hundred and forty-two dollars. The robbers had left the thirty-two cents. But Mr. and Mrs. Hamp Benson knew who the robbers were, and if the money was returned by six o'clock Wednesday night no steps would be taken. If they didn't return the money, the robbers would die.

I was practically sizzling by the time I read the story. I lit out for the dining room on a high lope. I was marshal of Blue Bucket and likewise deputy sheriff for our part of the county. Hamp and Rita should have told me right away. I could have gone out there and probably found some clues. I'd have had the thieves in jail by now. I'd have had their money back for them. Besides, it was part of my legal duty to look into crimes such as this was, and they hadn't even reported it to me.

I was steamed up and ready to whistle by the time I got to the hotel parlor, but before I could say a word, Hamp held a finger to his lips, and shook his head. He whispered, "Come here and take a look, but don't say nothing."

I looked into the dining room. Rita was waiting on tables, cool and pretty as she always was. You'd have thought it was just another day for her. The Luffkin boys were in from their ranch on lower Injun Creek, and back of their table was Joe Corwin who had a little outfit over the hill from Hamp's homestead. Hard Hat Harry and Ace Villard were sitting at a table next to the windows.

I stepped back into the parlor. "Nothing funny about that, Hamp. Hard Hat and Ace always eat a little early so they can get back to the saloon before anybody wants a game started, and the Luffkin boys and Joe eat here when they come to town."

"You watch, and you'll think it's funny," Hamp said. "Now come along and don't be surprised by anything that happens."

I was still sore about them not letting me knew what was going on. I said, "Look here, Hamp. I'm marshal of Blue Bucket.

Likewise I'm deputy sheriff. It's my bounden duty to look into things like robberies. Why didn't you tell me—"

"Billdad," Hamp said slowly, "you've known Rita a heap longer'n I have, but still you ask a fool question like that."

"I guess it is a fool question." I knew doggone well it was when I stopped to think about it. "I reckon sister wants to pull it off herself."

"That's it. Now just don't say nothing. She's got this all figgered out. Let her play it her way."

I said, "Sure," and followed Hamp into the dining room.

Hamp took a table between the Luffkin boys and Hard Hat Harry and Ace Villard. Right away Rita sailed up and said, "Billdad, did you bring today's paper over?" Before I could say a word, she went on, "I'll get them. If we give a couple of issues away free, we'll double our subscriptions. You'll see."

About thirty seconds later Rita showed up with the papers she and Hamp had run off. She left one with the Luffkin boys, then Joe Corwin, and us, and gave the last one to Hard Hat Harry. She came back to our table. "What are you having, Billdad?"

Before I had time to answer, Joe Corwin got up from the table and took a couple of steps across the dining room, right hand holding his belly. He was gasping for breath and saying, "I'm poisoned. I'm poisoned." Then he toppled over on his face and didn't move.

He was dead. I figured that was certain sure. I sat looking at him and couldn't seem to get up. I'd never had anything like this happen. In all the years I'd owned this hotel, nobody had ever even got sick over Mrs. Yerrington's cooking. Now Joe Corwin was lying there on his face, and there wasn't a doctor this side of The Dalles. Anyhow, I didn't think a doctor would do him much good.

Hamp started to get up. "I'd better see—"

"Never mind," Rita said, no more concerned than if she'd seen Hamp shoot a buck. "He's dead. I poisoned him."

"You what?" I squalled.

"I poisoned him. You see, Billdad, all that money Hamp had was stolen. I didn't see any chance to get it back, and I think any thief who's so little he'll steal the savings of a man who's just got married had ought to die. So I killed him."

That was when the big Luffkin boy got up. He did just about what Joe did. He took a couple of wobbly steps, kind of teetered around, and grabbed a table. "You—you poisoned me, too, didn't you?" Then he flopped over.

WELL, I have seen some strange things and I've done some strange things, but this topped everything. So help me, I couldn't have got up out of that chair if my life had depended on it. There were two men lying dead on my dining room floor. I knew I was done in Blue Bucket. Stealing or not, my daughter didn't have any business going around murdering people.

I meant to talk straight from the shoulder, but about all I got was a squeaky voice that didn't bother Rita. "Sister, you can't do a thing like this."

"I can't?" Rita shrugged her shoulders and kept on smiling. That smile was about as warm as a January sun when it's ten below. She nodded at the men on the floor. "What makes you think I can't do a thing like that? I've already done it."

"But what about Bud?" I pointed at the younger Luffkin boy. "Did he—"

"Sure, he'll pass out just like they did," Rita said.

It happened right then. Bud Luffkin didn't even make it out of his chair. He slumped down in his chair, his head on the table, and then fell to the floor, all loose and mighty horrible looking. I said, "Bud's breathing."

Hamp got up, examined Bud Luffkin, and came back. "No, he ain't breathing, Billdad. It's just the light, I guess."

"Rita, I'll have to arrest you for murder," I said, and still couldn't believe it had really happned. "I'm marshal of Blue Bucket and deputy sheriff, and I'll have to take you to Canyon City to be tried."

"I don't know why you should," Rita said. "You couldn't prove anything on these men, but they should have been punished."

"You see, Billdad," Hamp explained, "we knew it was one or two of five. Everybody else in the country had an alibi. Joe didn't, and neither did the Luffkin boys. Neither did Hard Hat Harry and Ace Villard. Fact is, they got mighty mad 'cause I asked them what they were doing the day we got married."

I began to see what was shaping up, but it looked to me as if the two gamblers were taking it in, lock, stock and barrel. Hard Hat had his back to me, and his neck was plumb red. Villard was facing me, and I never saw a man who looked as scared as he did. His face was more green than white. His mouth had gaped open, and his eyes had the wild look in them that a man gets when he's out of his head with a fever.

"You mean," I said, jerking a thumb at the two gamblers, "that you poisoned these men, too?"

"Sure," Rita said. "I had to kill all five of them to be fair, didn't I? I couldn't tell which one it was."

"But they're still on their feet," I said.

"They won't be long." Rita smiled that cold smile. "The stuff I put in their coffee acts a little different with some people. Some live for half an hour afterwards."

That did it. Ace Villard jumped up, a hand holding his stomach, and began to blubber, "We'll give it back. We'll give it back. There must be something—"

"Shut up, you fool," Hard Hat Harry bellowed. "They can't prove nothing."

"We've got enough proof," Hamp bellowed as loud as Hard Hat had. "I figgered some sneaking polecats might do a trick like this, so I made a little red

cross in one corner of those greenbacks. Did you ever see them?"

"Hell no," Hard Hat said. "I didn't look at 'em."

I NEVER knew whether Hard Hat aimed to tell anything or not. He was on his feet, facing me and Hamp. I got up, too, because I saw trouble coming, but Villard had swallowed the poisoning stunt, and I couldn't tell which way it would swing. Villard was still holding his

stomach, still babbling about being poisoned like a rat. Hamp had stepped around so that he was on the other side of Hard Hat from me. That was when Rita said:

"Villard, there is an antidote for that poison, but you won't get it if you don't give me back the money you stole."

"Sure, sure," Villard said, and threw a roll of greenbacks on the table.

"You fool." Hard Hat Harry jerked his gun and swung around to face Villard. That was when I hit him. I got him on the side of the head and he reeled over toward Hamp. Then Hamp swung on him on the other side of the head, and Hard Hat Harry went down. There wasn't any play-acting about this. He was out cold.

"You and Hard Hat stole the money?" Rita demanded of Villard.

"Yeah, we stole it. Half of it's there, and the other half is in Harry's pocket. You said—"

Rita handed him a glass of water. "Drink it, and Billdad, I'll turn these thieves over to you."

The Luffkin boys and Joe Corwin were on their feet and laughing so hard they had to sit down again. "Best show I ever saw," Bud Luffkin said when he could get his breath. "Yessir, that was a wowser."

"How'd you know?" I asked.

"Guesswork," Rita said. "They weren't at the wedding, and they were in the dining room the week before when Hamp told you about where he hid the money."

"We figgered we wouldn't hurt anything by trying this crazy scheme," Hamp said. "I've played poker with these two yahoos, and I figgered Hard Hat was a tough one, but Villard might cave, and by hell, he did."

I took those two over to Canyon City to the county jail, and all the time I kept thinking about how smart Rita was. I always claimed women should stay in the kitchen, but Rita argued that they had a right to vote and carry on their business and what not. Somehow, it kind of took the wind out of my sails when I thought about this. Rita was right. If she hadn't cracked Ace Villard with that trick, I never would have got them.

I felt kind of bad. In fact, I felt so bad I resigned my job as mayor, I retired from being postmaster, I quit being town marshal, and I sent in my deputy's star. I wound up by selling everything I had, and started out. Just moseyed around. Took four years at it. All the time I kept wanting to see Rita and Hamp. I'd heard from them and knew they had some kids. I wanted to see them, so I headed back for Blue Bucket, and rode on out to Injun Creek.

First thing I saw when I got to the homestead was a real nice cabin, a fine garden and some flowers. I rode on, and there was Rita chousing some cows down from the timber. Three-year-old Netty was riding a paint pony, two-year-old Betty was on a bay, and Letty, that's the yearling, was on the saddle in front of Rita.

Rita let out a holler when she saw me, and I asked, "Where's Hamp?"

"Hamp? Oh, he's in the house fixing up another room."

Well, you know, it felt mighty good to sit in front of the fire that night and hold my grandkids on my lap. I gave them ten-dollar goldpieces, and Letty, that's the yearling, popped hers into her mouth. Rita got mad because I gave one to Letty. She thought they were nickels.

I leaned back in my chair, ducked when Netty swung a fist at me, and said, "Hamp, I've got some money that's gathering dust in a bank in The Dalles. I'd like to buy up some of these little outfits around here and throw them together in a big spread. That is, if you'd like to run it."

Hamp looked at Rita. He didn't say anything until she'd kissed me and said, "That would be fine, Billdad."

"That would be fine all right," Hamp agreed.

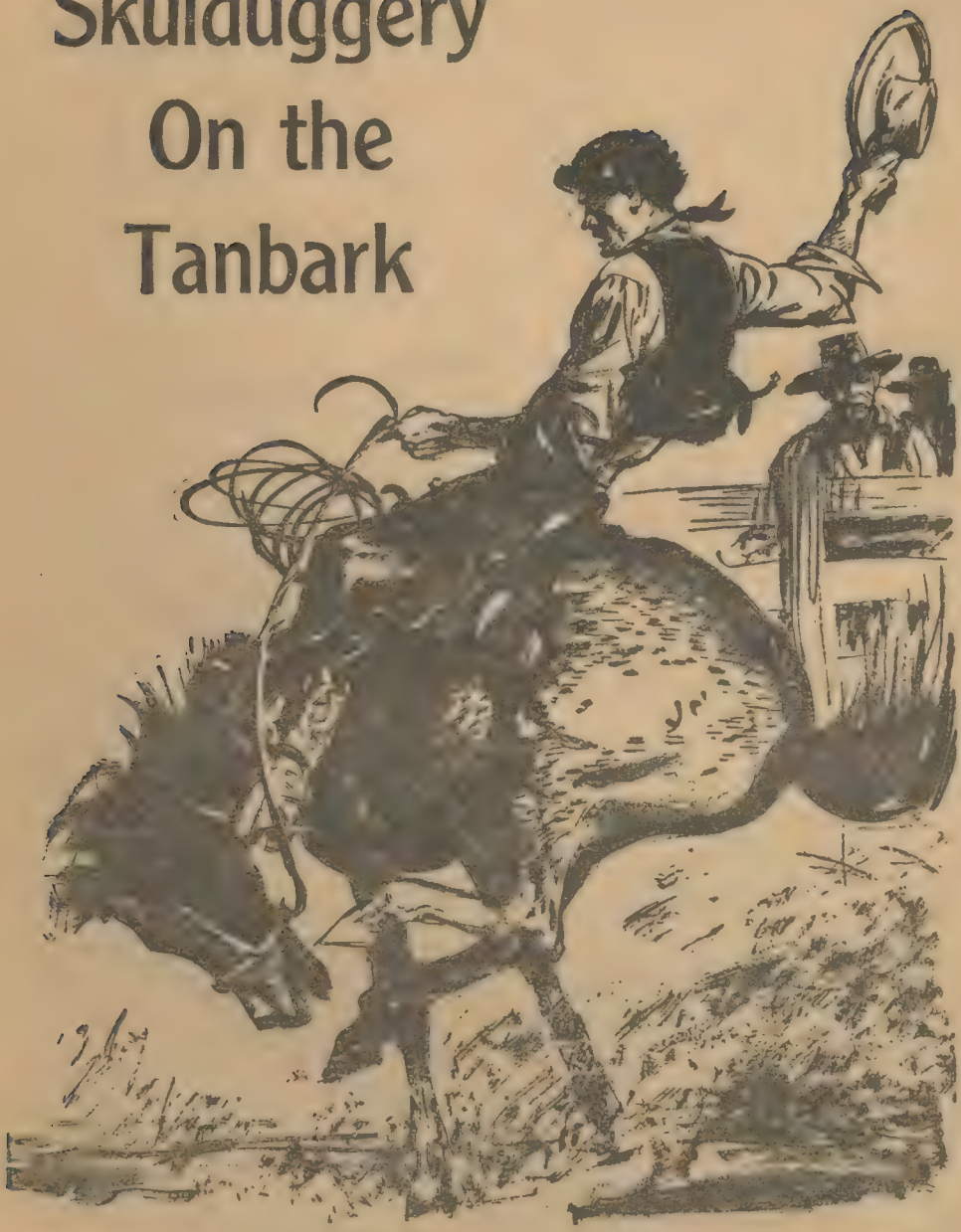
I looked down at my squirming lapful of granddaughters, and I couldn't help thinking what pretty girls they'd grow into. And heaven help their husbands.

"What's the next one going to be?" I asked Rita.

"A boy," she said firmly.

And I'll be doggoned if it wasn't. Sister did it again.

Skulduggery On the Tanbark



Rodeo rules were forgotten when Dan Badger rode the hurricane deck of that wild-eyed bronc.

By Barnie Stacy

OUR Sageville rodeo was only a local show, held each fall for our home entertainment. It was still cow country and for three days the old-timers could dream and relive

those wild, free days of the open rangeland.

But it wasn't amateurish. We always engaged a professional bucking horse string from Wyoming. The longhorns for the bulldogging were genuine and mean. Likewise those murderous Brahma steers.

The prize money was always big enough to draw the tophands and competition was wide open. A few of those old mossyhorn, millionaire cowmen pioneers took care of that. Also, we had local talent good enough to finish in the money at Pendleton, Cheyenne, and Fort Worth. So our Sageville Stampede attracted both contestants and spectators from all over, and for three rip-roaring days Sageville let down its hair and whooped and howled.

Still, Dan Badger was the last man in the world I expected to show up to lay down his entry fee for the bronc stomping. Dan, with that wrenched back that hadn't been right since that old outlaw cayuse, Dynamite, had fallen on him two years back.

"Dan," I said, "you're loco. You want to commit suicide?"

I hadn't been any good myself since a mankiller had tromped me in the arena a few years back. But the rodeo commission always gave us old broken down cowhands a job where we could smell horse sweat and make believe we were a part of the show.

Dan shrugged, grinned sheepishly. "Cap," he mumbled evasively, "did you ever know an old pensioned fire hoss that could stand still in the pasture if he smelled smoke, or heard the fire gong?"

I knew he was lying. That wasn't it. And I was pretty sure I knew the answer. Dan was desperate. He needed money. He had to have top money, or close to it, if it killed him. His wife, Ginger, had been an invalid for the past year. An operation by a Denver specialist would fix her up. But it cost a lot of money, and drought and a skidding beef market had just about wiped Dan out. They lived on his spread ten miles out where he and Ginger had located after they married and quit the rodeo circuit. Forever, they solemnly pledged.

GINGER, a champion trick rider, was the cutest little redheaded cuss that ever balanced on shoulders atop a running horse. She and Dan had played the rodeo circuit for five years before they married. And both were generally up there in the money, too.

"You stubborn dang fool," I growled. "Ain't a man in this town wouldn't advance you all you need. Or the rodeo hands would make up a pot quick, if they even guessed the truth."

Dan flushed. "Hell of a credit risk, me," he flared. "And I'm not down to acceptin' charity—yet."

That was Dan. Pride. Oozin' with it. The man who'd handed out a small fortune to rodeo widows and orphans, and old crippled up stiffs like me. As I wrote out his receipt I wanted to shake him, choke some of that foolish pride out of him.

The surprising thing was that he started out topping some mean ones with his old form. And if it hurt his back, he wouldn't let on. I felt certain Ginger didn't suspicion what he was up to.

The first day he won top day money with Thad Ballentine running second. Next day Thad was first and Dan was runner-up.

When the show opened I helped work the chutes. I asked Dan about his sore back.

"It's all right," he grinned. "Funny thing—reckon that first hoss I forked must've jerked it unsprained." I couldn't decide if he was lying.

With their head start, the odds were heavy that the winner of that juicy finals prize money would be either Dan or Thad. And Thad Ballentine, with all his conceit and brag, was a top-notch bronc peeler. It wasn't the first time Dan and Thad had battled it out in the arena, for they'd been rivals back in the days when Dan had followed the tanbark trail. Nor was that all. Thad had wanted Ginger.

Thad, tall, well-built, was handsome and knew it. He went in for fancy dress

and gaudy trappings. It jolted his vanity when Ginger turned him down for good-natured Dan, an ordinary blue-eyed, tow-headed cowhand. Thad hadn't forgotten, nor forgiven. Many in the stands remembered this and it spiced up the contest so that tension mounted as the showdown neared.

Evenly matched, each likely to make a ride on any horse he drew, we old heads knew the outcome wouldn't depend on the men at all. The decision rested with the horses. The man that got the hardest bucker, if he stayed aboard, would win. Knowing this, and knowing Thad for a sly trickster, I tried to watch closely when they held the drawing back of the shutes. The numbers were in a hat, and corresponded with numbered names on a sheet held by a contestant.

It fell to Thad's lot to hold the list and announce the horse's name when a number was drawn. I was trying to peek over Thad's shoulder when Dan dipped his hand into the hat and snagged number thirteen. I got only a fleeting glimpse as Thad hastily made his check mark, but I could have sworn I saw the name Powder Keg opposite number thirteen. Powder Keg was rightly named, for he exploded from the chute and he fought his man from the first jump to the last. Not many could set him.

But Thad didn't call out Powder Keg. Instead he leered in Dan's direction, loudly announced, "Old Flourflusher."

Dan stared, stunned. His shoulders sagged; he seemed to age ten years in five seconds. For Old Flourflusher was a joke. He oughtn't to have been with the rough string. A big, bony, hammer-headed roan, he was just a smart old humbug.

The ornery rascal always busted out of the chute rearing and bellering like a hell-bent outlaw. To the average spectator it looked like the real thing. But the judges and the rodeo hands knew better. He pitched high and hard, but his lunges were straight, almost rhythmic, and all a rider had to do was roll with his punches. A ride on him didn't rate many points.

OLD FOURFLUSHER was an actor. A wise old showman. A regular sugar-eating pet, he knew he had to get out there and hump himself for ten seconds, then go back to his oats. And he'd learned that when the ten-second gun boomed his chore was finished, and he'd quit bucking, right then. A rider had to jump off quick, or be left sitting there like a statue, feeling silly. Most bucking strings had one or two like Flourflusher for the girls to ride, or the clown to cut capers on; or sometimes a local bigwig made a ride on him to show off to the home folks.

I had the feeling that Dan had been slipped one off the bottom of the deck when Thad, who drew last, cut in. "Well," he smirked, "looks like this is my unlucky day. I snagged Powder Keg. He'll probably dump me."

It popped out before I could choke it off. "From the stink around here," I blurted, "I figured you'd drawed a polecat." The others had scattered, leaving us alone. He purpled, clenched his fist, started for me. I lifted the heavy bull prod stick I use for a cane, otherwise I guess he would have hit me, cripple or no. He stopped, gritted an oath, wadded the number list in his fist and crammed it into his fancy pants pocket. He turned and stalked off.

That's when I started working my brain overtime. It was Dan who'd footed the doctor and hospital bills those long months after the bronc tromped me.

Thad went out first and made a good ride. Powder Keg, an honest man-hater, used every trick in his book trying to unseat him, but Thad laughed arrogantly, waved that fancy hat at the grandstand, and all but applauded himself.

There wasn't much doubt as to who would drag down first money after that ride. The judges scored some half-dozen fair to middling rides, and then it was Dan's turn.

He climbed the chute woodenly, with the bearing of a whipped man. I didn't hurry. I fiddled with the cinch, staring, fascinated, at those cockleburs in Old Fourflusher's tail.

"Look, Dan," I said, trying to sound

cheerful, "go out there raking the old bum, and make it look as good as you can. I smell dirty poker and I got an idea where the proof is."

In the meantime I was messing around, my hand under the saddle skirt, spacing some of the cockleburs. Earlier I had spied the bottle of "high life" in the oat bin, used to drive out weevils, and after the horse drawing I'd slipped it in my pocket with a vague idea in mind.

As Dan let himself down into the saddle, and while the other chute man fumbled with the release bar, I doused that old cheater's rump with the liquid gas. In about five seconds that stuff begins to burn like liquid fire on a hairy skin. Just then Thad swaggered past.

"Too bad, saddle tramp," he sneered. "You want me to pay for Ginger's operation—and buy you a few hamburgers out of my prize money?"

The man was rotten, but I was glad of that shot in the back. I wanted Dan to go out of there fighting mad. I had to slam him down hard to keep him from climbing out of there after Thad.

"Clamp him with your knees, dang you," I muttered in his ear. "I'm going to fix him with my bull prod."

THE bar slid back. I stabbed Old Fourflusher in the flank with my battery-operated electric bull prod, shut my eyes and prayed. I heard Fourflusher's surprised gasp. And when I opened my eyes my heart almost stopped. In mid arena, I saw yards of blue horizon between the seat of Dan's patched britches and the saddle, but soon they made contact.

Fourflusher was squalling like a lost soul. Back peaked, head between legs, he was all but breathing on the back of Dan's neck. He sunfished, reversed in midair, broke in two in the middle, and once I thought he would climb right into the saddle with Dan. He bounced like a cat on a hot stove, landing stiff-legged. He tried to run backward through himself.

I got flashing glimpses of Dan's face. He was sweating. His expression ranged from astonishment, through elation, to grim determination. The noisy crowd became very still, sensing that they watched something extra special. The judges, yawning a minute before, gaped, rubbed their eyes. They knew that for once Old Fourflusher wasn't acting. The ten-second gun boomed, and still he fought on. The pick-up boys, surprised, had a time running the old fool down.

As they pulled Dan off, Old Fourflusher tried to bite his leg off. I had already hobbled to mid arena, and was picking up the crumpled number list I had seen Powder Keg buck right out of Thad's pocket when I saw them take Dan off. He slid right on over the pick-up man's horse, collapsed in the sawdust.

As I crow-hopped to him I took a hasty squint at the list. It was as I thought. Number thirteen was Powder Keg. And Old Fourflusher's name wasn't even on the list.

I put my arm under Dan's shoulders, lifted him. I felt myself responsible, felt terrible. "Dan, say you ain't bad hurt."

He opened his eyes, grinned weakly. "I'm all right. I'm fine, Cap. Just shook up. Say! Was that horse spooked?"

Thad Ballentine stormed up. He didn't wait for the judges' decision. He knew, everybody knew, what that verdict had to be. "I protest that ride!" he yelped, staring wildly. "There's been dirty pool—that horse was doped." He sniffed the air. "High life! I can smell it."

I sidled over, waved the telltale sheet under his nose. "You bet! Crooked work aplenty, Thad," I said softly. "But what you smell—now could it be horse liniment on Old Fourflusher's joints?"

He blinked, flushed. His hand dived into pocket, came out empty. He knew when he was whipsawed. Either way, he had to lose. He took the easy way. His slitted gray eyes drilled me clean through with hate but he forced a tight smile.

"Why, it must be horse liniment."

Dan, wobbly, was on his feet, grinning happily as he shook the judges' hands. I hustled off after the still fighting Old Fourflusher. I would cool his blazing rump with a pound of hog lard. I would also buy him a whole barrel of sugar. I might even kiss the old scoundrel.

A Brand for Colt Burning

By Joe Archibald

After many years gambler Frank Bexer was sitting in an another game with the West's worst outlaw. But this time the stakes were life and death—with Satan calling the bluff.

FRANK BEXER leaned forward in his saddle and watched the Long S range stock drift across the plateau, the bulls bellowing, the wild steers rising to sniff and stamp and bawl reply. He quickly rode over to join up with Perrin's other riders and helped haze off the intruders and turn back the animals bent on wandering.

Overhead the stars were little chip diamonds set in the blue-black night sky. There was a chill in the air that got deep into Bexer's bones and put a rawness in his throat. At one-thirty, the last guard relieved and he was more than content to fog to the line camp and get under the blankets.

Bexer did not go to sleep immediately, as tired as he was. He regarded one of the young Long S punchers standing in the pale light from a lantern hanging from the big tent pole. He was stripped to the waist, disdainful of the cold. The rider's muscles lay flat against his bones, bronzed and clean-skinned. He chatted like a magpie as he dragged at the last inch of his cigarette, a youngster as happy as the day was long simply because he was alive.

Bexer's mind went back at least twenty

years, but he could not recall when he had laughed deep inside. Nowadays he seldom indulged in a surface laugh, for the weight of a lot of misspent years had him stifled.

Where was there peace of mind when you had to be wary of every strange rider that passed by? When you had to count the cigarettes you smoked from dawn until dusk of every day? When you had to stop and rest and catch your breath if the occasion arose to necessitate walking your horse up a steep canyon wall? *Laugh, Kid. Thank the Lord for his good graces and let's hope you won't ever find out how easy it is for a good man to go bad and how impossible it is to reverse the process.*

Bexer had been with the Long S only four days. He had ridden into the ranchyard when Perrin's hands were having supper, and he'd been tired and very hungry and more than a little sick. All along the chuck-line he had taken handouts in much the same manner as a pariah dog gets an occasional bone. Begrudgingly, and more often than not, with appropriate insults. Ferg Willet, the foreman, had invited him in for chuck. He'd hinted that Bexer should not take too long about it and then get on his way.

He was leaving when he'd had his fill, and then Sam Perrin, the Long S owner, had called to him when he was getting on his jaded claybank. Perrin had said, "Wait, Mister," and had walked up and looked him over carefully. "You're hardly more'n a shadow, friend. You look to me like you been livin' on bean water. That bronc's in need of a rest, too. Turn it loose in the corral, then come on up to the house."

WRAPPED in his blankets in the line camp tent, Bexer wished he had met Sam Perrin twenty years ago. He would be resting comfortably tonight, perhaps, and there might have been no past filled with nagging details. Perrin had taken him to the house and doctored him up, then put him in a big comfortable bed to rest for a full twenty-four hours. He had offered him a job.

"Until you can get a few dollars ahead, Frank," the Long S boss had said. "Until you get your stomach well lined an' that sickness out of you. Can't keep you on indefinitely, an' anyway, you ain't rugged enough to weather the winter work."

It had been fair enough. Perrin had asked no questions regarding the past, and he, Bexer, for the first time in his life, was grateful. He knew he would go to hell and back for the Long S owner if the need arose.

The other Long S hands had accepted him with reservations. Ferg Willet was stringing along with Perrin's judgment for better or for worse. But Bexer knew the foreman had already tagged him for what he was: a man who had ridden mostly with the wild bunch; who had taken his money at the point of a six-gun when he needed it; and who had killed when he'd believed the circumstances had warranted it. Willet had said when Bexer had picked himself a bunk, "You do your work and you'll get along while you're here, Bexer. I don't like you nor dislike you."

"I'll keep in my place, Willet," he'd said. "I see what you mean."

Physical weariness finally had its way with a troubled mind and Bexer fell into a deep sleep.

At dawn the Long S punchers roped out their saddle stock and packed their beds. Sam Perrin joined his men toward the middle of the forenoon and helped trim Long S stock out of the Double Link herd. He judged the results to be not over two hundred head. A carload of beef was left there, but the Double Link would load it in Mayo with the stray shipment. Perrin rode up a creek and called to Willet:

"Push that stuff along an' turn it loose about three miles from the home ranch, Ferg."

The foreman nodded, kept looking at the boss. "I don't like it, Sam. We've combed the range to the rim and back again and we're short over a thousand head."

Perrin nodded. "The stock cattle should have increased anywhere from thirty to seventy per cent, an' the calf tally the last couple of years warrants it, Ferg."

"I've been thinkin', Sam," the foreman said, and Frank Bexer slid his bronc down the bank and stopped a few yards away. "Wouldn't be hard to change a Long S into a Double Link, not for a practiced hand. Don't go to thinkin' I'd suspect Will Comerford, but he might have a couple of riders who like to live beyond their means. Hands have been hard to get the last few months, an' ranchers have hired anybody who can rope a stump without falling off his bronc."

Bexer coughed. Willet looked over at him. The foreman said quickly, "I did not mean to infer anythin', Bexer."

"It's all right, Willet." Bexer was about to reach for the makings, then changed his mind. He had forgotten for a moment that he'd had a smoke two hours ago.

Sam Perrin said, "Agnew isn't much of a sheriff, but I aim to talk to him. A jurisdiction such as his is mighty invitin' to wide-loopers. Well, I'm goin' to ride to Mayo, Ferg. I'll be at the hotel most of the afternoon. Where's Slim Thaw and his two cronies?"

"They're scoutin' around over in the hills, Sam. Figured they might stumble on to somethin'," Willet said.

AFTER Sam Perrin rode away, Willet said, "Come on, Bexer, an' let's git this bunch of stock movin'."

"Right," Bexer said. "Somethin' besides missin' cattle is troublin' the boss, Willet. I could tell when I was only here a couple of days."

"No concern of your'n, Bexer!" Willet snapped.

"Won't mention it ag'in," Frank Bexer said, and clamped his lips tight together. He had his own problems, more than his share of troubles. That night, when he had stopped in at the saloon in Mayo City, before he'd found the road to the Long S, he had caught a glimpse of a face in the mirror and felt a stirring back in his mind that was unpleasant. He'd thought, *The man has seen me before, and so I must have seen him. I've seen and ridden with a lot of bad ones in my time. Which one is this?*

He coughed wrackingly and Willet said, "You'd better get in town soon's we get the cattle moved out, Bexer. You see a doctor!"

"The dust is aggravatin' it," Bexer said. *Was that rider he'd seen in Mayo City ridin' for the Double Link?*

Two hours later, driving the stock across a wide flat bench, Willet suddenly twisted around in the saddle and watched the dust boil off the crest of a ridge. A horse and rider rolled down with it, and Bexer pulled up his bronc's head when he heard a shout. He rode over to Willet and the foreman's face was grave.

"Slim Thaw's sorrel," Willet said. "There's been trouble."

Thaw came in, the bottom nearly run out of his horse. He said, "Ferg, they got Whitey Mauger." He drew a deep breath, shook sweat out of his eyes. "Me an' Vic found him where he was shot off his bronc. We'd spread out, Ferg—we heard a couple of shots an' finally found Whitey. Wasn't dead when I left. Said he was ridin' along through a dry creek when the man stepped out from behind a rock an' let him have it 'fore he could start reachin'."

"Did he get a good look at the man, Slim?"

"Yeah. Had only one good eye," Whitey said. "Nose was almost flat against his face, an' he had a lantern jaw."

Bartl! The name leaped out of a corner of Frank Bexer's head. And now he knew the name of the man he'd seen in Mayo City. He remembered a night in a town called Mayfield, on the Idaho line, a town controlled by Bartl's kind.

Bexer had sat in on a poker game with Gus Bartl and three of his men. . . . There was a gold watch with a hunting case in his saddlebag at the Long S bunkhouse. Three months ago he had tried to sell it to a puncher along the Colorado chuckline, but the offer hadn't been to his liking. Then something had gone wrong with it and he had dumped it in with the rest of his meager possessions. There was blood on the watch. . . .

Willet had to call to him twice. "Yes," he said.

"We're turning the stock loose here," the foreman said. "I'm ridin' back there

with Thaw. You get into Mayo fast an' notify the boss!"

"Sure, Willet," Bexer said, and felt fear run along his bones. There was a time when Bartl's name had no effect upon him, but he had coughed a lot of his courage out the past two or three years. There was a rope waiting for Bartl and for any man the law could prove had ridden with him. After that poker game, Frank Bexer had ridden with Bartl. A stage had been held up and two men had been killed.

Willet said, "That man shot Whitey because he was gettin' too near a certain place. Maybe a brush corral, Slim! Bexer, you tell that posse to head for the Fargera Hills. All right, get movin'!"

"I'm kinda scared they moved in on Vic, too, while I was gone," Slim Thaw said as Bexer rode away. "But somebody had to stay with Whitey, Ferg."

BARTL. Bexer knew his end would be swift and sure if the man got a look at him. Gus Bartl always said that if he hanged he would want a lot of company to ride into hell with, and he'd said he'd have it, too. Not that Frank Bexer put much of a value on his life or had any idea that it would be a long one, but there was one thing he would like to do before he died. It did not matter what it was as long as it was something decent. Something to think about while in the process of passing on.

Gus Bartl would know Bexer was in the valley. He would be looking for him. Frank Bexer was about to take a road that led out of the valley instead of the one stringing toward Mayo City when he thought of Sam Perrin. He had slept in the man's bed, had received at his hands the only kindness he had ever known. Perrin had given him food and medicine, and a chance to get on his feet, and had asked no questions.

Frank Bexer rode to Mayo City. He tied his horse to the rail out in front of the Mayo House and then walked into the hotel. A stout, apple-cheeked woman was at the desk. He asked her where he could find Sam Perrin.

"I don't believe he'd want to be bothered now," the woman said. "This is the afternoon he plays poker with Will Comerford, Beresford, and Ira Pollard. If it's very important—"

"Sure is, ma'am," Bexer said. "One of his riders got shot."

The woman's face blanched. "He's in room twenty-seven. Go right up."

Bexer hurried up the stairs. A few feet from a half-opened door, he stopped, scarcely knowing why. Possibly because he felt the urge to eavesdrop for a moment which is a common ailment with most people in the world. He heard a gruff voice shout:

"Well, Sam, I hope you brought plenty of money. I feel lucky today. Will, did I ever tell you about my son, Al?"

"What's he done, Ira?"

"Took after me, sure enough, Will. Got the looks I had once, too. The way I had with the ladies. Up an' married Rad Mullane's daughter over in Wyomin'. Mullane has the biggest cattle ranch in the state. Pretty well fixed, that boy! Knowed he'd do somethin' big."

"Speakin' of sons, Ira," a higher pitched voice said. "How many men will ever have a doctor for a son? One more year an' Dave'll hang a sign out. Curin' folks that couldn't be cured before, an' seein' babies are born just right is about the most important work in the world, I figure."

"Unless it's the business of railroads," the gruff voice cut in. "My boy, Harry, is in charge of construction for the Pacific an' Northern. He—"

A chair was suddenly kicked over. Bexer heard Sam Perrin take over. "Your kids, they all had the right chance! They never had the kind of mother my boy did when they was just able to move around by themselves! I couldn't keep my wife company, an' play nursemaid an' build up the Long S at the same time. It was only by the grace of the Lord your sons turned out right!"

"Look, Sam. We never meant to—"

"No?" Perrin fairly shouted. "More'n a few times I've had to sit by and listen to you brag, and all the while wonderin' whatever became of my kid. The next time, make sure I'm not around!"

"Sam, we're mighty sorry!"

"Hadn't no right to sound off like that," Perrin apologized. "But it's plain hell, Ira. His mother wasn't much good an' I don't figure she give him much of a chance. You'd think somebody by the name of Perrin would have come this way in the last twenty years unless—well, sometimes men change their names for many reasons— Sorry, I don't feel like playin' poker this afternoon."

BEXER heard the Long S boss walk across the room so he moved quickly. He nearly collided with Perrin when the man came out into the hall.

"Boss," Bexer said, "Whitey's been shot! Willet sent me in to let you know."

"What?" Perrin roared.

The three cattlemen came out of the room and heard him tell Sam Perrin about Thaw's suspicions, and that Thaw figured the rustlers would try to move the stock when it got dark.

"I'll see Agnew right away," Perrin said. "Ira, Will, if you've got any men in town, round them up!"

Bexer left the Mayo House a few moments after Perrin and his friends and walked into the saloon to have a drink. He had warned Perrin and now his job was done and it was time for him to ride on. What little money was due him was not worth the ride back to the ranch, and besides, he felt that the boss of the Long S owed him nothing. Bexer put down his glass and went out into the street. He saw Perrin come out of a frame building across the street with a short fat man he guessed was Agnew, the sheriff.

Already, the posse was forming. Ira Pollard, owner of the Wagonwheel, called to Perrin: "You don't aim to go along on that kind of business, do you, Sam?"

"I sure do, Ira," Perrin snapped. "There's some of my stock out there, an' I ain't so old yet my boys have to do all my fightin' for me!"

Bexer knew Gus Bartl and the kind of men the outlaw took into his wild bunch. Bartl would make a stand until all his guns were empty and some of the posse would not come back. Quickly he changed his mind. He walked to the hotel, loosened his bronc, and got into the saddle.

As Bexer rode over to the bunch of horsemen, he felt a nervousness in his fingers, the old wildness surging through his blood. A man like Perrin, he thought, would take chances. Perrin, to show the younger men his years hadn't taken toll of him, would forget caution and plunge recklessly ahead.

Agnew and Perrin rode up. The sheriff said, "By the description, I'd say our badman is Gus Bartl, men! If so, he'll have some pretty salty hombres with him. Bartl's a long way from his own territory, Sam."

"Sometimes a man has to be, Ben. For his health."

Frank Bexer had a short fit of coughing, and a Double Link rider observed him curiously.

"No job for you, Frank," Perrin said. "Those are orders."

"The hell with orders, Perrin. I'm ridin' with the posse!" Bexer quickly made a cigarette and his hands shook. The Long S owner shrugged. "Your funeral," he said.

Bexer had to grin at the remark. He rode out of Mayo City with fourteen men. Two miles out, the flats were tawny in the early autumn heat and the sweat began to soak the hides of the fast running horses. There was very little breeze, and the dust kicked up settled very slowly and formed a low-hanging cloud behind them.

Bexer thought of the night in Mayfield, of a rider named Georgie Ide. The kid had been quick of temper and slow at card sense, and had consumed too much cheap whisky for one of his age. He'd lost all his money and had put up the gold watch. He'd lost that, and then he'd cracked wide open and had said something to Bartl no other man had ever said and lived to tell it. The outlaw had drawn and fired almost in one movement, and Ide had pitched over the table, dead.

THERE had been blood on the cards Bexer had used to beat Bartl. The outlaw had handed over the watch along with his small pile of currency, and had said, "When we have the time, Bexer,

we'll ask for a chance to get even." One thing about Bartl, Bexer had to admit, the man was a good loser. He had not seen Bartl but once after that, the night they'd held up the Rockmont stage. The bunch had had to scatter. Bexer had never tried to find Bartl's gang again, but had ridden south for three days and three nights. . . .

Now, he was sitting in on another game with Bartl, a different and far more dangerous game. A game where the stakes were life and death and where you couldn't bluff a man out.

An hour later they crossed a brawling stream and then turned off the wagon road and climbed a steep grade that led to the Fargera Hills. Talk broke when they came to a river bottom and rode across a long gravel bar through the swift current of the stream itself, the water swirling at their saddle skirts. The sun was down low and the riders threw long shadows as they veered northward.

In the low hills marking the edge of the badlands, Agnew called a halt and suggested that the posse split up into three groups.

Perrin said, "I'm heading straight in, sheriff, the way Thaw and my other punchers went. Bexer, you watch for landmarks." He looked over at the cadaverous rider. "I got a hunch you're at home in this kind of country."

Bexer grinned in the dark, then led the way for Perrin and five other men. Yes, it was going he was familiar with. This was a land of fantastic contours; a hodgepodge of topography. It was a maze affording shelter and food for hidden cattle. Bunch grass was plentiful and there were springs of cool, clear water. Scrub pine pocked the sidehills, and brush choked the gullies and narrow draws.

Perrin said, "I doubt if Agnew will be much help to us. His heart isn't in his work."

Bexer hauled his bronc's head up. "Listen!" he called out hoarsely, then coughed.

"Don't hear nothin'," Perrin grunted.

Bexer led the riders into a narrow ravine and laboriously climbed diagonally up its high left bank, his horse buckling into the slope like a goat. The rugged trail gave way to a long narrow bench, and from the western rim, the Fargera River was visible, looping in crazy curves over the floor of a small valley.

Not far away a stretch of pine bent before a rising breeze and a chill ran along Bexer's bones. The mist that was rising would not be kind to his chest. He stopped and rested his horse for a moment, and then they all heard the sharp crack of a rifle. There was a bunch of answering shots, and Bexer said, "Thaw and Willet must have flushed them up, boss," and slapped a hand over the gun he wore. He motioned to Perrin and pointed.

The Long S owner made out the shapeless blobs moving aimlessly about far down the end of the slope. "Cattle," he said. "Looks like we didn't come too soon, Frank." Another gunshot threw its spiteful sound against his words, and he waved his riders down into the valley.

Bexer took the lead and yanked his gun loose. Scattered beef bawled and broke away before the onrush of horses and men. When Bexer reached a bowl-like depression in the valley floor, where half a hundred head of beef were madly milling, a voice roared, "Leach, Rolling W!" The shape of the rider loomed up in the fog, and Perrin answered the man.

The Rolling W puncher got in close, peered at Bexer and then at Perrin. "We cut 'em loose from the cattle, Perrin, but they got away. Thaw and Willet and Vic Sage are on their heels. We—"

"Whitey?" Perrin asked hoarsely.

"Dead, Perrin. Vic told us he didn't last but a minute after Slim Thaw left. Vic had to shoot his way out of it himself—we met him later—then went after the spooks."

"They can't be far away," Perrin bit out. "We don't git 'em tonight, there'll have to be another time."

They heard the sound of gunfire again. "Only about a mile away," Leach said. "An' the sound hasn't drifted a bit the last five minutes." He cursed and tugged at his shoulder. "They burnt me with a

carbine slug, knocked me off the bronc. Blast their eyes!"

Perrin said, "Agnew thinks it's Gus Bartl, Leach!"

The rider swore softly. "Well, let's go after 'em, Perrin!"

THEY rode down the windswept valley wall and splashed across the Fargera River and into the worst of the badlands. A carbine cracked again, its echo running through the hills. All around them was a tract of wild country cleft in every direction by cedar-lined gorges and narrow ravines. It was a land channeled by the unpredictable elements of centuries, a paradise for wild beasts, and a haven for hunted men.

Bexer led the way upward over a rocky flume, and his breath was sawing when he reached the top. As he leaned over the saddle horn and rested, a bullet suddenly wind-ripped just where his head had been. Perrin and the others quickly left their saddles and hugged the ground.

"Keep low!" the Long S boss warned. "Get off that bronc, Bexer!"

He slid to the ground, every movement an effort. His chest seemed clutched by a great giant hand and his lungs were full of needles. He coughed and tasted his blood. He lifted his head and looked into a narrow canyon where he saw shapes moving among the great boulders and against a screen of stunted pine. The crack of a carbine struck flat against his ears when he took aim at a dark shape not twenty yards away.

A man called out, "It's Thaw of the Long S."

Perrin cried, "Don't shoot, Bexer!"

Thaw slid behind the boulder sheltering Perrin, and he waited until he had his breath. "They're holed up in a cabin on a ledge and pressed right against the rock wall, Sam. A curly wolf and two of his men. We shot one back there. We can get 'em, Sam, but they'll get one or two of us before we do. They know they'll hang an' they'll hold out to their last cartridge. I figure there's only one window in that shack, and it's on the left side. We'd have to shoot curves to put bullets through it. That hideout was built one time for just such a time as this."

"All right," Perrin said. "We'll rush 'em when the mist gets thicker. There'll be more men here in a few minutes, Slim."

Bexer shook his head. The dark and the mists did not bother Bartl and his outlaws. They could see through both, and most of their work had been done under cover of foggy nights.

Yes, Bexer knew, some men were going to die. . . . men with families, with sweethearts. Young punchers, now as full of life as Whitey had been, might be dead before midnight. Bartl picked his marksmen carefully. They had to show their skill with a rifle and a six-gun before he let them ride with him. Bexer had reason to know.

"I don't leave here until I get the skunks," Thaw ground out. "I'm fixin' it for Whitey."

"Take it easy, Slim," Perrin said. "Don't forget that girl in town. No cause to go off half-cocked. Let some of us old buzzards take the risks."

A rifle cracked. An answering shot came from the cabin, and a man cursed painfully up there by the boulders.

Thaw said, "Let's move up, Sam!"

They inched forward. Bexer winced when a bullet dug into the hard ground a foot away from his squirming body and drove stinging fragments against his cheeks. Sure, the spooks up there could see in the fog and the dark. They finally reached the shelter of a natural parapet of large rocks, and Bexer heard Ferg Willet call out softly:

"That you, Slim?"

"Yeah. The boss is here, and five other men. What do you think, Willet?"

"We've got to take long chances, Slim. The situation don't change a bit. The devils can shoot," the foreman said.

BEXER was also used to the dark. Behind a windfall, he appraised the canyon wall to his left. A man could climb that and stick onto a narrow ledge, flattening himself against the wall. He could inch along, taking a lot of time, until he

got close to the window the posse could not see.

Here, he thought, was the chance he had been looking for. He knew of three lives he had taken during the years, and it would be good to know he'd saved three or four when his time was up. Bexer felt a fierce delight running through his blood when he thought of Gus Bartl up there in the outlaw hideout. He remembered how that grub of Sam Perrin's had warmed his stomach. Once more he experienced the sheer delight of the soft bed Perrin had offered him that night when every muscle and bone of his six feet of frame was screaming and protesting with utter exhaustion.

Willet fired a shot. There was no return from Bartl's gang. They were saving their bullets for the showdown. Bexer slipped away, snaked across the rocky floor of the narrow canyon. Taking his time, he conserved what little strength that was in him. He plunged into a swath of pine at the foot of the wall and felt his way along until his fingers came in contact with solid rock. He groped for a way up, finally found a foothold, and began climbing.

Fifteen feet up, Bexer flattened himself against the side of the wall. Muffled voices came up off the canyon floor, and once he thought someone spoke his name. The gunshots became more widely spaced now. As he started edging along, he felt a terrible dryness in his chest. He put his mouth against rock when he coughed, but it still sounded like the bark of a rifle. The sweat was pouring out of him. Any second he could plunge downward and smash himself against the rocks below. One false step, a loose rock. . . .

He hoped Sam Perrin would realize why he had done this. How would it feel to die? Would that look of horror he had seen on Georgie's face be spread over his? All because Georgie Ide had lost his watch. How many hours had he been inching his way along the wall? The cabin looked much closer now. And he had to cough again. He dug his teeth into his arm and the cough broke inside of him and nearly ripped his lungs apart. There was the taste of salt in his mouth.

Bexer kept moving along the narrow ledge that kept rising and falling under his boots. Loose rock clattered down the side of the wall and seemed to make booming sounds when they hit the big boulders below. His cheek pressed against rock, he looked toward the cabin.

It was mighty close now, and Bexer knew he could fire a shot in through that small window. It was a rectangle choked by mist and darkness. Suddenly a match flared inside the hideout and Bexer caught a glimpse of blurred features. He could hear them talking now. It was Bartl all right. He'd never forgotten that voice. Somebody in there let a carbine go.

Just a few more yards . . . inch by inch. The ledge began to widen and he could fairly walk along, at the same time careful to buckle into the wall. Now he was not more than fifteen feet from that window. He rested for a few moments and then called out, just as a shot came from down on the canyon floor:

"Bartl! Gus Bartl!"

There was a moment of oppressive silence that pulsated in his ears. A rough voice called out, "Who the hell is that?"

"Bartl, it's Frank Bexer. Let me in there. Keep me covered!"

"Bexer?" came the reply, and then there was a medley of subdued voices.

Somebody barked hoarsely, "Don't shoot yet, Nolly. Bexer—let him come close, but keep your guns ready."

IT WAS nearly time now. Bexer looked up at the sky before he moved toward the window. The stars were shining through the mist and a soft breeze was beginning to sweep across the canyon. He was not as afraid as he thought he'd be. He inched forward and then flattened his thin body against the slabs, and the window was thrust outward on its hinges. Climbing up, he squirmed through the narrow opening and fell heavily to the floor. Gus Bartl and a barrel-chested short man pulled him to his feet. Their faces were dangerous in the thin candlelight.

Bartl said, "It's Bexer. Yeah, I heard you was around here, Frank. What's—"

"We can hold out until mornin', Bartl,

then I'll show you a way out. Too risky by night," Bexer said, and coughed. "So you beat me to the cattle?"

Bartl laughed. "Yeah, Frank. Where have you been since that night?"

"Movin', Gus. Look, I need a gun. Lost mine climbin' up here!"

"Toss him a hogleg, Perley!" Bartl said. "Sure, we can hold out, Frank. We got four Winches an' six Colts."

A wiry man with a little head threw Bexer a gun and he caught it deftly. He fired it as it settled into his hand and drove a bullet between Gus Bartl's eyes. Bexer yanked his other six-gun out of the belt behind him and fired a shot at the squat outlaw. He kept firing and dodging.

Bullets were coming at Bexer now. The man with the little head got him through the chest, up high, and he laughed as he bounced back against the wall. He kept emptying his guns. There was only one man on his feet now. He traded all that was left in his guns with the outlaw, feeling only abstractedly the stuff that was striking into him. The light got dimmer. He was the only one on his feet now, but not for long....

The muffled thump of guns brought Sam Perrin's head up. Ferg Willet swore with disbelief.

"The shootin' is goin' on inside the cabin, Ferg," Perrin said. "You think it had somethin' to do with Bexer's disappearance?"

"Look out, it might be a trick," Thaw said, and cocked his head to listen to riders coming in behind.

The gunfire stopped. A deathly stillness dropped down over the crouching possemen and a sudden gust of wind blew into their faces, driving powdersmoke into their nostrils.

"Bexer," Willet said. "How could he have got in there, Sam?" His voice was husky and gave his wonderment away. "We can move up. Somethin' tells me—"

Perrin and the cowpunchers advanced slowly up the slope, practicing extreme caution. Fifty yards out, Leach, of the Rolling W, threw a shot, but got none in return. Ferg Willet slid a cartridge in place in his Winch and the sound seemed to carry for miles. Still the nerve-tingling quiet held over the cabin roof.

"Come on," Thaw said, and started running, the others fanning out behind him.

WILLET and Leach shouldered the cabin door open, and they half fell inside. Willet saw Bexer first. He was crumpled against an old rusty stove, his eyes staring at them, but seeing nothing. Bartl was jackknifed against a crude bunk, a six-gun a foot away from him. Two other men were on the floor, frozen into grotesque shapes.

Sam Perrin and Thaw came in. The others clogged the doorway. Perrin kept looking at Frank Bexer, and he knew what the man had done. Two Colts were on the boards near the thin man, and Perrin went over and picked them up, broke them, and found every shell fired.

"He had to do some tall shootin'," Perrin said, marveling. He stooped over Bexer and closed the man's eyes.

"Always figured he could do it," Willet said. "Well, he saved some of our hides."

"I had him figured for a lunger," Slim Thaw said, his voice full of respect. "I guess he wanted to go out this way. Must have climbed the wall, Sam, and worked along it. He had guts!"

Perrin nodded. "I wonder who he really was."

Early the next morning Ferg Willet and Sage and Slim Thaw went through Bexer's belongings. Willet found the heavy gold watch and hefted it in his hand. Then he took out a jackknife and pried the case open. There was engraving inside. The Long S foreman read it, then brushed his sleeve across his eyes. He called to Thaw, and handed him the watch.

The puncher read aloud: "To Sam Perrin. From Wilma."

Vic Sage said, "Let me see that!" and took it from Slim Thaw's hand.

Later, Ferg Willet went up to the ranch house. He found Sam Perrin sitting at his old desk in the living room. He placed the watch in front of the Long S owner, turned, and started to walk out.

(Continued on page 54)

Bounty Hunter's Harvest

Intriguing Novelette

By

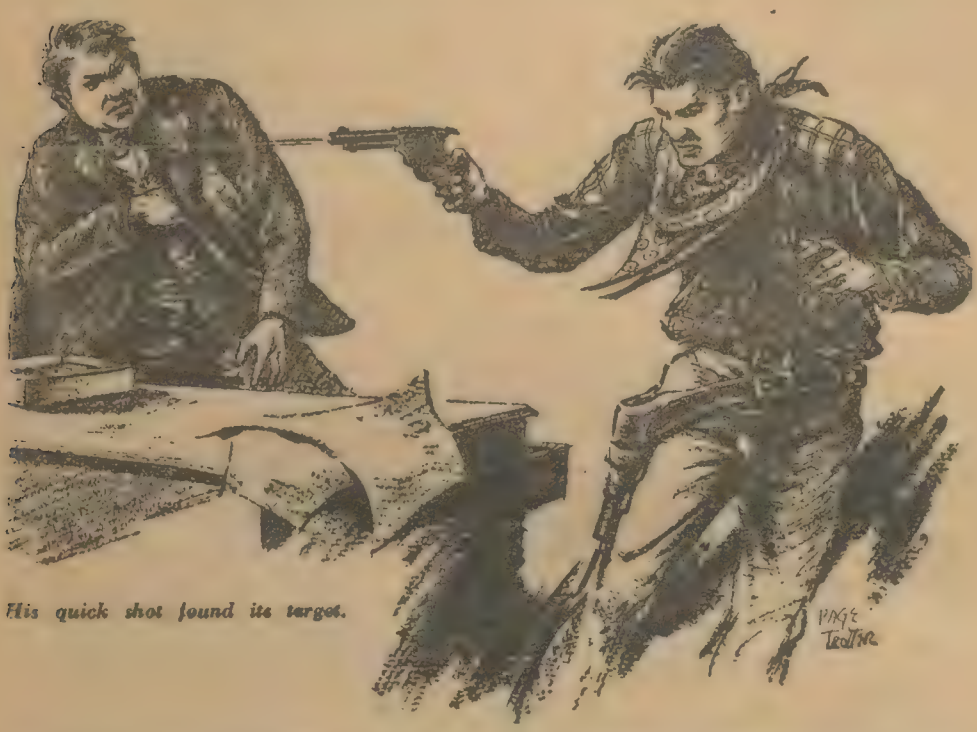
Wayne D. Overholser

I

DRAKE GORDON was on the wrong end of the chase, a new experience for him and one that wasn't to his liking. He'd heard bullets whining around his ears all day, and some had done more than whine. One had slapped through his Stetson and cut a lock of black hair in passing. Another had opened a wicked gash along his left shoulder that ached dully and persistently. A third had cut the tall heel off his right boot. Now, to top it off, his roan gelding was finished, Gordon was out of ammunition, and he was riding into Sager because there was no place else to go.

He couldn't ride down Main Street

For ten years Drake Gordon waged a one-man crusade against crooks. But when he rounded up Judge Random, a lobo lawman, he had to deal with both Blackstone and bullets.



His quick shot found its target.

with the Random gun pack on his tail. Even with a loaded gun it would have been about as smart as giving lightning an invitation to strike him down. With an empty gun it was a guaranteed method to get a quick trip to boot hill. So Drake Gordon did the only other thing he could. He whirled his horse in a left turn just as he came into town, turned right around a barn that faced the alley, and for a moment was out of sight of the Random boys.

Nina Cottrell's house was on the corner, and it was her barn that for a few seconds stood between Gordon and the Randoms. He didn't want to get Nina mixed up with the Random bunch, but right now he didn't have time to pick and choose. He swung down, gave his horse a clout with his hat, and ducked into the barn.

The Randoms thundered past, a tough, wild lot, filled with liquor and lustful hate. Gordon, watching them through a spider-webbed window until they disappeared, measured his life expectancy, and found it to be, with good luck, about five minutes. He looked along the alley at the string of woodsheds and barns. One of them might furnish temporary shelter. Nothing more, for no one in Sager except Nina would risk giving him a refuge, and he wouldn't take it from her.

There was this naked moment in which Drake Gordon looked at death exactly as a dozen men had looked at death before they'd faced his guns. Nina would have called it retribution. She said a person sows one kind of grain and reaps a harvest of that same grain. In his lifetime, Gordon had sowed a lot of grain. Lead, and that was what he would harvest.

Gordon felt the strange emptiness in him that any trapped thing feels. In most ways he'd been a fool for luck. Bounty hunter. Town tamer. Deputy sheriff. Always the law had been on his side. He'd been right every time when he'd killed a man. He was right now, but he wouldn't get very far telling that to Judge Random. He'd never even get to the judge's court. The Random boys would gun him down first, and the judge would see to it that a trial was an unnecessary expense to the county.

"Drake."

A slim woman had come into the barn, a pretty woman who held the glory of the sunlight in her auburn hair and the glow of a great pride in her blue eyes.

"Nina." The word was jolted out of him. He hadn't intended her to see him. "I was just leaving."

Gordon started to move past her, but she caught his arm. "Come into the house, Drake. You haven't got much time."

"No." He shook his head. "I've cluttered up your life too long. I'm not pulling you down to my level."

"I didn't mean that when I wrote it," she blazed. "Don't be a fool."

"I'm a fool by nature."

GORDON started for the door again, knowledge pressing hard against him that time had run out. He heard horses' hoofs in the alley, heard big Bragg Random say, "He sure didn't jump into no hole and pull it in after him. We'll start with the Cottrell woman's barn, and search every damned shack along the alley. He's got to be in one of 'em."

"Quick." Nina pushed Gordon toward the end stall. "Lie down."

"I'm not going to—"

"You fool," she whispered. "You stubborn fool. I can't let you die whether you want to or not. I need you."

"You need me?" His eyes searched hers. He had never heard her say that. She had been too proud to admit she needed any man.

He turned toward the stall then, and when his back was to her, she lifted an ax handle that had been leaning against the wall and struck him on the head. He spilled forward, falling face down into the litter of the barn floor. Nina tossed the ax handle away, picked up a pitchfork, and quickly moved a pile of hay that was in the corner into the stall. When the Random men came in, cocked guns in their hands, Nina was carrying a forkful of hay to one of the mangers.

"What do you want?" Nina demanded, dropping the hay into a manger.

"Drake Gordon," Bragg Random said. "Where is he?"

"How would I know?" she asked scornfully. "We were going to get married once. Or perhaps you never heard."

"Yeah, we heard." Bragg Random bared his yellow teeth in a grin.

"Then you'd know he wouldn't be here, so you can get out. Go on. I don't want Randoms around here any more than I want Drake Gordon."

Bragg was the oldest and biggest of the Random boys, Slats was the middle one, tall and bony and the fastest gunhand in the family, and Freck, the youngest, was freckled, redheaded and fat. Tad, the one between Bragg and Slats, had died in front of Gordon's gun in Pine City the day before.

"Might be you're lying." Bragg's muddy eyes narrowed, a forefinger scratching a fat jowl. "Gordon ain't far away."

"Well, go look for him. I'd think a blind man could see he isn't here."

Nina leaned her pitchfork against the wall and faced them in the runway, blue eyes blazing in anger. Bragg moved past her, looking into each stall, and paused to stare curiously at the pile of hay.

"A stall is a funny place to pile hay, ma'am," he said.

"It's none of your business," Nina snapped, "but if you have to know, I moved it so I'd have room in the corner for that load Freck is going to haul me." She nodded at the fat Random. "I'm not paying you till I get it, and that hay had better be good, or I won't pay you after I get it."

"It'll be good," Freck said uneasily. "Come on, Bragg. Let's drift."

"I just thought of something." Bragg reached for the pitchfork. "Mebbe Gordon is right here." He brought the tines down sharply into the hay, but there was no movement in the pile. "Hell, guess it was a bad notion." He replaced the pitchfork. "I'm hoping, Miss Nina, you ain't hid him, 'cause Dad won't like it if you did."

"And Dad had better not be crossed," Nina mimicked. "Is that it?"

Bragg's face reddened. "You've been putting him off a long time. I hope you've finally got sense enough to see how the land lies."

"I see all right," Nina said. "Goodby."

Bragg wheeled and stalked out, the other two behind him.

Not until they had mounted and ridden off did Nina clear the hay away from Gordon. When he came to she was cradling his head in her lap, and she was crying. He'd never seen her cry before in all the years he'd known her. She told him what had happened, and said, "I'm sorry I hit you, but I couldn't take chances on you making a sound or moving."

Gordon sat up, and put a hand gingerly to his back. "Feels like I got some of that pitchfork. If I hadn't been out cold I'd have hollered for sure." He grinned. "Thanks for slugging me."

"I saw you when you came around the house," Nina said. "What happened?"

"I'm deputy sheriff in Lewis County now, or mebbe you'd heard."

"No, I hadn't," she said tonelessly. "It's been quite a while since I've heard anything about you."

PROBABLY she hadn't heard of him, he thought grimly, since she'd written she couldn't marry him. She'd asked him to give up his way of life and he'd refused. She'd said she'd stayed awake night after night thinking about it until she'd come to a decision. She would not let him pull her down to his level. She would not be known as the wife of a notorious gunslinger, and she did not want her brother Bud to have a man like that for a brother-in-law.

"Well, I figgered you might change your mind someday, so I sort of settled down. The sheriff got word that Tad Random was headed for Sager, and he'd likely come through Pine City, that being the only pass through the mountains he could follow unless he went a hundred miles out of his way. Tad showed up all right, but when I told him he was under arrest, he went for his gun. I killed him." He was watching her closely now. "Does that make you hate me?"

"No," she cried passionately. "Perhaps I've been wrong about a lot of things. I know I've been wrong about the Randoms. I wished you'd killed all of them."

"It's a chore that needs doing," he said dryly. "The other boys rode over to meet him. Tad was headed home for Papa after helping hold up a train in Idaho, and I'm guessing he wanted to hide out here till the heat died down. Anyhow, I started back to the county seat, and the first thing I knew the rest of the Randoms exploded all around me. They blocked me off so I couldn't do anything but take off through the timber and keep going till I wound up here like you saw."

"Which is like outrunning a pack of young wolves so you can hide out with the old he-wolf himself."

"That's about it. Soon as it's dark, I'll start out."

"Across the desert," she said scornfully, "and on foot?"

"I'll steal a horse."

"And get yourself hung by the first party you meet. No, Drake, Stay right here."

She had changed. Her tone was almost begging. Always there had been a great pride in her, a pride which had kept them apart. She had wanted a social position and security. She had asked him to buy a store, and he had said he would shoot himself before he would sink to selling cheese and crackers. Now, by the late afternoon sunlight streaming through the barn windows, he saw the lines that had come into her face, the gray hairs that were more numerous than the last time he'd seen her, the

shadow of trouble in her beautiful eyes.

"I spent ten years waiting for you," Gordon said slowly. "I'm the kind of a gent who can't see any other woman after he's seen the one he wants. Sometimes I've thought that loving a woman you can't have is the nearest thing to being in hell that can happen to a man."

"Drake, I—I—I never knew it was that way."

"Kind of a funny twist," he went on, "after all that's happened, for you to save my life. I'm thanking you, and I'll be drifting."

She laid a hand on his long-fingered one. "Drake, I never thought men like you were necessary until these last few weeks. Now I know if your kind of man had cleaned up this town years ago before Judge Random got it under his thumb, Bud wouldn't be where he is now."

"Bud?" Gordon laughed. "You mean to tell me Bud's in trouble?"

"If you're going to laugh—"

She started to get up, but he pulled her down. "Im sorry, Nina, but you know what I think of your sissy brother, and nobody's to blame but you. I guess it's just as well we never got married. Loving you wouldn't be enough if you tried raising my son the way you've raised Bud."

"I'll drive the horses in about dusk, Drake," she said tonelessly. "Soon as it's dark you can get out of town. I'll bring you something to eat, too."

"With you hating guns, I don't reckon you'd have any .45 shells in the house, would you?"

"Yes. I'll bring some."

II

AFTER Nina had gone, Gordon slept for a time, the hours in the saddle making him bone-weary. It was dusk when he woke, and for some reason the first memory that came to him was Nina's admission that she had been wrong. Always so proud, so certain sure of herself and what she wanted from life. Whatever the trouble was, it had broken her. Thinking of it now, hope flamed in him. If he lived through this, he'd be back. Or he'd write to her. Perhaps they could still salvage some happiness from the years that waited for them.

Then Drake Gordon knew he wasn't leaving. If the Random bunch wanted to finish this thing, they'd have their chance as soon as Nina brought him the shells. He had his own pride. When a man had had to crawl as he had, to have a woman hit him on the head and cover him with hay to save his life, it was time he started squaring things and to hell with the odds.

That was what Drake Gordon told himself. Then he grinned a little as he thought he might make somebody else believe his lies, but he couldn't believe his own. Nina was in trouble, and so was her sissy brother, and Gordon was the kind of gent who could get them out. He had drawn down fabulous sums cleaning up towns that weren't half as tough as Sager, towns where the officials were honest and wanted a decent town.

It wasn't that way here. Perhaps the people wanted something else, but the fact remained that the government was rotten, that Judge Random had only his own conscience to reckon with when it came to handing out his peculiar brand of justice. The strange part of it was that Drake Gordon wouldn't get a cent for tackling the toughest job that had ever come his way.

When Nina came with his supper Drake Gordon knew what he had to do.

"I waited until dusk," she said, "because I was afraid some of the Randoms might be watching. I'll go get the horses now, and in another half hour you can ride."

"I'm not riding," he said. "What's this trouble Bud's in?"

"He's in jail waiting trial for murder."

It was crazy and fantastic. Bud Cottrell was the kind of man who wouldn't murder a bee after he'd been stung. Gordon said, "Let's have the yarn."

"You know how I've made Bud work in the Mercantile ever since he's been

big enough to run errands because I wanted him to be a storekeeper. All the time he's been crazy about guns. Finally he fussed so much that I let him go to work on the ranch."

"So that's why you said you had been wrong."

Nina nodded. "I've tried to force Bud into the particular mold I wanted, but it didn't work. Then I've had some troubles, too. The judge decided he was going to marry me."

"What would that crooked son want with you?"

"Perhaps I'd give an air of respectability to some of his crooked enterprises." Her smile was a quick lift of her lips. "Anyhow, I said no, but he kept calling on me. Every evening! Finally he threatened me. When I still said no, they framed Bud for murdering old man Sturges. He's in jail now."

"Have you got those shells?"

She handed them to him. "Why aren't you riding, Drake?"

He loaded his gun, and filled the loops of his belt. "I've got an errand to run first." Stepping into the runway, he moved through the door and turned toward the courthouse.

"Drake." Nina ran after him, and when she caught him, she drew him from the alley into the deep shadow of a woodshed. She whispered, "Drake, I knew that you'd help me, but this isn't the way."

"Why not?"

"There's too many of them. Can't you solve a problem without using a gun?"

"Not this kind of a problem," he said sourly. He thought of the years he'd waited for her, and of the change that had come now only because her brother was in trouble.

"Drake." She was close to him, her body against his, her arms around his neck. "I can't stand it if they hang Bud, but it would be worse to know that you had died because of him. I'll marry Judge Random if it will do any good."

"I don't think it would. The judge has got something up his sleeve besides a wedding ring, and I'll find out what it is."

A HORSE in the alley silenced them. Presently a man rode past, and Gordon recognised the high, thin shape of Slats Random.

"They think you'll try getting away as soon as it's dark," Nina whispered.

"What do the Sager people think of the Randoms?" Gordon asked.

"Don't people always hate those they fear?"

"Perhaps you have some ideas about how to do this."

"There's a new city marshal here. He might help."

"Sager wouldn't hire a marshal who didn't carry out Random's orders. I'll play this my way, Nina. If you want to help, bring two horses into the willows back of the courthouse. Have them there in half an hour."

"I'm going with you."

He considered that for a moment, measuring the risks there would be for her, and the lesser risks that would face her if she stayed in Sager. He said, "No. Bud and me will make out better without worrying about you."

This time when Gordon moved away Nina did not call after him. He moved cautiously through the shadows, pausing often to listen. Slats Random rode back along the alley, and Gordon ducked around a chicken house until the sound of the horse was gone.

It was completely dark by the time Gordon reached the courthouse. He moved across the yard to it, and hugging the black, north side of the building, worked his way around it to the front. The window directly above him was Judge Random's. Gordon had been in Sager enough to know it was the judge's habit to sleep most of the day except when court was in session, to spend two hours or more after supper in his office, and devote the rest of the night to poker.

Gordon waited on the shadowed side of the building, watching men drift along the street and listening to their talk. Presently Judge Random came waddling past the Starlight Saloon, crossed the street, and made the turn toward the

courthouse. A tall man caught up with him, and asked:

"The boys turn Gordon up yet?"

"No, but they will. A man the size of Drake Gordon doesn't just disappear like a mouse in a horse barn."

"Mebbe he'll show up downtown gunning for you."

A great laugh rumbled from Random. "He's not a fool, Lance. Fact is, he's a smart hombre. Now that it's dark, he'll get a horse and make a run for the Lewis county line. My boys wouldn't go over the line even for the son that gunned Tad down."

"Court tomorrow, ain't there, judge?"

Random laughed again. "That's right, marshal. We'll see justice given to Bud Cottrell, the murderer of old man Sturges." The judge nodded and climbed the steps of the courthouse. He called back, "Stay out of trouble, Lance. Leave Gordon to my boys."

"I used to know Gordon pretty well, judge," the other called uneasily. "I don't think he'll leave town for a while."

"Then he'll stay here a long time," Random said ominously, and went on into the courthouse.

The tall man stood for a time in front of the courthouse, and presently the light from Random's window fell directly across his high-boned face. Gordon recognized him then. He was Lance Perkins, a lawman who had served as marshal in half a dozen Arizona towns. The thought bothered Gordon because Perkins had always been a good lawman, and he wasn't the kind who would carry out Judge Random's orders.

Perkins twisted a smoke. Lighting it, he stood there patiently as if he had no intention of leaving. Gordon, watching him, could not see any sense in it, and anger began to grow in him. The best time to get at Judge Random was right now when the boys were on the prowl for Drake Gordon.

FIVE minutes ticked away, and then ten, and Lance Perkins was on his second cigarette. Gordon had always been cautious when caution was needed, or he wouldn't have lived as long as he had, but this had reached the place where something besides caution was needed. Any way he looked at it, the odds against him were far too long, and time would make them longer. He plucked his gun and came swiftly around the corner.

He said, "Hold it, Lance."

Perkins tossed away his cigarette. He drawled, "Howdy, Drake. Had a notion you was around. How long you been there?"

"Long enough. Toss your gun over there in the grass."

"You're making a mistake, son," Perkins said softly as he followed Gordon's order. "The whole Random outfit's beating the brush for you."

"What chance has Bud Cottrell got?" Gordon picked up the marshal's gun, and slipped it into his waistband.

"They'll try him in the morning and hang him by sundown."

"Walk inside the courthouse and go to Random's office."

"I never knew you to work a long shot like this, Drake," Perkins said as he moved up the steps. "You were always one to play the sure thing like going after a train robber who had his hands shot off."

Lance Perkins had been the steady kind of marshal, the sort who would follow the line of duty no matter what the cost was to him, and Gordon knew the tall man had no high regard for him.

He said, "This is a funny spot for you to be."

"A man's got to eat," Perkins said laconically.

As they moved along the hall, Gordon said, "Go on, and don't try giving Random a hand if he gets tough, or you'll get plugged, too."

Perkins made no answer. He opened the door into the judge's office and went in, Gordon a pace behind. "You've got company, judge," Perkins said. "In case you don't know him, this is Drake Gordon."

Gordon stepped inside and away from the door, his gun on Random. He said, "I didn't come here to kill you this time, but one off-color move, and you'll get it

right in your fat belly. Put your hands on the desk."

Random swung his chair around. He looked at Gordon, looked at the gun in his hand, and brought his pale blue eyes back to Gordon's face. "How'd you get mixed up in this, Lance?"

"Hell, I didn't have no choice," Perkins snapped. "I was standing in front of the courthouse, and Gordon comes around the corner with a gun in his fist. What did you want me to do, knock him down with a cuss word?"

"I'm not paying you to talk smart, Perkins," Random snarled, "and I don't pay a man long after he fails at a job I set for him."

"I want Bud Cottrell, Random," Gordon snapped. "Send Perkins after him. Lance, don't pass the word out I'm here, or your fat boss will die sudden-like."

"Bring him in." Random nodded at Perkins, and settled back in his chair. He was a huge man weighing over three hundred pounds. Some of it was fat, but under that veneer was a big-boned frame and plenty of hard muscle. His shrewd, calculating eyes were almost closed as he studied Gordon for a long moment. Then they snapped open as if he'd made a decision. "You're tough and you're good with a gun, Gordon, but no man alive is tough enough to do what you're thinking about."

"We'll see," Gordon said.

"Look at it from the standpoint of cold logic. I would never go into Lewis County because you'd made me trouble. When you come into my county, you can expect the same trouble. Regardless of your killing Tad, I wouldn't let you stay here. Some of our honest citizens might get ideas."

"Where's this talk getting us?"

"Maybe nowhere. If you're smart it will get us somewhere, because I've got a proposition. For the moment we'll overlook the fact that you're Tad's killer. For that moment we can do each other some good. I'll let you have Bud if you'll persuade Nina to marry me. We'll settle our personal troubles later."

"Why do you want to marry Nina?"

"She's a beautiful woman, and I'd be proud to have her for my wife. That's reason enough, isn't it?"

"No," Gordon said bluntly. "For a man who likes money and power like you do, it's no reason at all."

"That's a funny thing," Random said slowly. "I was thinking the same thing about you coming in here after Bud. You know if you turn me down on this deal, you'll die. I've followed your career rather closely, Gordon, because there was always the possibility that some of the honest citizens I mentioned might raise a purse for you. Is that the reason you're here?"

"No."

"Surprising. You're a buzzard, Gordon, with a certain amount of courage. You picked up escaped convicts or wanted men if there is enough bounty offered for them to make it worth your while. You charge a thousand dollars to tame a town. I can understand why you've made your living that way, but I can't understand why you'd hire out as deputy in Lewis County for maybe a hundred dollars a month. You must have a side line. Perhaps it fits in with your coming here."

"I was chased here," Gordon said, "but as long as I am in this hellhole, I'll get Bud out of a jam. Then mebbe I'll come back and wipe the slate clean."

Random leaned forward. "How much are you getting for making this try, Gordon, and who's paying you?"

"Nobody's paying me anything," Gordon snapped.

III

PERKINS had come in with Bud Cottrell. The boy was twenty-one, a long-necked, freckle-faced kid who looked and acted younger than he was. Now, pinning his dark eyes on Gordon, he began to tremble.

His voice shook when he asked, "What is this? Are you taking me out to be shot by Random's boys?"

"You're no good, and I reckon you won't be any good after I save your neck," Gordon said sourly. "All right,

Random, get on your feet. You're walking with us."

"You're not taking my offer?"

"No. On your feet and out of the door." He handed Random's gun to Bud. "If I get it, Bud, plug him and run for the willows."

Perkins was standing just inside the door, his eyes on Gordon. He said, "The boys will be back before long, Drake. This ain't gonna work."

"It'll work or this turkey'll be dead. Bud, take Perkins back to the jail and lock him up."

"Don't do it, Drake," Perkins said quickly.

"Hell, I can't leave you floating around. Go on, Bud. I'll wait here."

Judge Random stood in silence until Bud returned, a stolid mass of flesh, his meaty lips drawn tight against his teeth. When he heard Bud's tread in the hall, he said, "What are your plans, Gordon?"

"A long walk for you, judge. Mebbe it'll work the fat off." He jerked a thumb at the door. "Get a move on, Bud. All right, judge. Through the door and make a left turn. Turn left again when you get to the corner." Gordon stepped up so that he stood beside Random, and motioned for Bud to do the same. He had folded his arms, the muzzle of his partially hidden gun prodding Random's ribs. "We'll just walk along easylike so if anybody comes by they'll think we are out watching the stars."

Random gunted a curse. They went out of the courthouse and down the steps that way. Then Random asked, "Want to make that deal yet, Bud?"

"No."

They turned left. Random said, "It'll be too late after you're convicted of murder."

"No deal," Bud said.

They moved around the corner and along the courthouse to the willows.

"What kind of a deal was it, Bud?" Gordon asked.

"None of your damned business," young Cottrell snarled.

"He's not tough, Gordon," Random said, and laughed softly. "He's not tough at all, and when I get him in court, I'll bust him wide open. Kind of funny, isn't it, Gordon, him talking to you that way after you risk your neck pulling him out of the jug."

"Awful funny," Gordon agreed sourly. "When I get him out on the desert I'll work him over." They had reached the willows, and he saw the outline of the horses ahead of him. "Bud and me are riding, judge, and you're—"

A descending gun barrel caught Gordon on the head, dropping him into a bottomless pit. Another gun prodded Bud in the back. Slats Random said, "Take it easy, kid."

Drake Gordon came to with a whacking headache. His first thought was that getting slugged twice within a period of five hours was a lifetime record for him, and he wondered how long his head would hold up. Then he felt the pain from the bullet gash along his side and the sting from the stabs of the pitchfork tines in his back, and he amended it to wondering how long his body would last.

He got to his feet and leaned against the wall until the nausea left him. He made a quick exploration of his prison room, found it to be small with a single window high in the wall above his head, and without furniture except for a narrow cot nailed solidly against the wall.

GORDON sat down on the cot, thinking grimly that this, too, was something new for him. In all his tough and smoky years, he had never got himself into a jam like this, and the ironic twist to the whole thing was that it was the first time he'd ever tackled this sort of job for love instead of money.

Then Gordon's mind shaped up the picture of what had happened at the willows, and he didn't like what he saw. He remembered seeing the horses. Nina, then, had been there ahead of him. The Random boys had found her or followed her. By this time Bud would be back in jail, and everybody was worse off than before Drake Gordon had started his one-man crusade.

Gordon got up and again examined the room, using most of his matches and finding nothing new except the absence of a

door. The entrance to his cell must be through a trap door from the top, and with the ladder gone, there was absolutely no escape. He came back to the cot and sat down, a feeling that was close to panic in him. It was bad enough to be trapped in Nina's barn, but this thing of being thrown into a solitary confinement cell without even a chance to swing a fist on his enemies was worse.

The smashing of glass in the window brought Gordon's eyes upward. He caught the shadow of an arm, heard the clatter of something hitting the floor, heard a man's quick steps as he walked away. Gordon scratched a match, and saw the long-barreled .45 that had been flung into the room. He stared at it while the flame raveled along the match and burned his finger. He dropped it, felt on the floor for the gun, and examined it by the light of another match. There were six loads in the cylinder.

Gordon sat down on the bed, the gun held loosely between his knees, and tried to fashion this strange miracle into the pattern of events, but could not. There was no one in Sager but Nina Cottrell who would want him released unless it was her brother Bud, and he wouldn't be free to do it even if he had the courage. Gordon was still sitting there when a trap door opened above him, and a ladder was slid through it. He shoved the gun inside his shirt as Bragg Random growled:

"All right, bucko. Get up here."

There was no use worrying about how a miracle comes into being. The fact was that he had a gun—the use of a gun was Drake Gordon's trade—and even with the odds standing as they were, the weight of it against him was a comfortable feeling. He came warily up the ladder and into a hall.

Bragg Random was holding a lamp, a cocked gun in his hand. Slats was beside him, his lean face vengefully dark. He drew his Colt as Gordon's head appeared through the trap door, and said:

"Bragg here might miss, Gordon, but I wouldn't. Any kind of a funny move, just any kind, and I'll build a window in your skull."

Gordon stepped away from the trap door and, following Bragg's nod, went down the hall and through an open door. It was a big and well-furnished room, a stone fireplace at one end with a variety of arms and Indian weapons on the wall. Judge Random was sitting behind a huge oak desk in a corner beside the fireplace, his meaty fingers interlaced in front of him, his face as placidly bland as a Chinese Buddha.

Freck was standing behind his father, and when he saw Gordon, he said sourly, "This is a lot of damned foolishness, Dad. Let's take him out into the desert, and be finished with the job."

The judge raised a big hand. "When you run the show you can give the orders. Until then, keep your mouth shut." He motioned for Gordon to come toward him. "You heard what Freck said?"

Gordon stopped with only the desk between him and Judge Random. Slats had remained by the door. Bragg had moved to the end of the desk, and stood stolidly watching Gordon.

"I heard," Gordon said.

"Perhaps you'd like to know where Nina is and what's happened to Bud." He sat back, his reinforced chair creaking under his weight. "Not that you care anything for Bud, but Nina is silly about him, and with you thinking of Nina as you do, I thought you'd like to know about Bud."

JUDGE RANDOM didn't play a cat-and-mouse game like this without a definite object in mind. Gordon studied the big man a moment. Then he said, "Let's see your cards, judge."

"I've made a compact with the devil. Ever hear of a deal like that." Random smiled thinly. "I want one million dollars. When I make it I'm moving out, and the boys can take over. You can help me, Gordon, and I think you're the kind of sucker who will. I had you pegged a little wrong when you busted into the courthouse. I figured you'd made the same deal with the devil I had, but when you came in after Bud for no better reason than the fact that you're in love with Nina, I changed my mind."

"You can have Lance Perkins or somebody else do this job you've got slated for Gordon," Bragg cut in.

"No." Random shook his head. "Everybody knows that Gordon wouldn't play our game. When Perkins pinned on the star he got some of the same smell on him we've got on us. Now here's the game, Gordon. The Cascade and Columbia Railroad is building into Sager. I've bought up the right of way so they'll have to deal with me.

"The Cottrell ranch was the last link, and it's important because it has a mile of right of way where it comes up out of Tombstone Canyon. I've got it all now from the Columbia to Sager, and the company will pay one hundred thousand dollars for it." He smiled triumphantly. "I had a little trouble with Nina, but it's fixed now."

"That was the reason for the murder charge against Bud, and you offered to clear it if he'd get Nina to give you the right of way."

"That's right, and your harebrained scheme played into my hand. I told Nina we'd work you over so she wouldn't recognize you and she signed up. So did Bud." The judge reached into his pocket for a cigar. "We're all set except for one small item. That's where you come in. I wouldn't have thought about using you if I hadn't found out you're the gallant sort who does things for a woman's love."

"Go on," Gordon grated.

"The moneybags who puts up the dinero for the Cascade and Columbia won't do business with me. He says he won't build into a county where one man has as much say-so as I have. He will do business with you. You're the last man in the State of Oregan he'd suspect of working for me, especially after you shooting Tad."

"Go to hell," Gordon said, backing away from the desk. "I wouldn't run one of your errands for—"

"Now, now," Random said thinly. "I've got a club over you, my friend. If you carry this transaction through, Nina and Bud will be released at the Lewis county line. Bragg, you and Slats bring the Cottrells in. I think our tough Mr. Gordon will change his mind when he sees them."

Bragg muttered an oath and wheeled out of the room, Slats behind him. Gordon's fists clenched at his sides, his stomach muscles knotting. He said, "They don't come any lower than you, Random."

"Sure." Random nodded. "I'm right at the bottom. That's how I made my pile, and it was part of my deal with the devil. I've built slowly and well, Gordon. None of this flitting about taming towns for me." He took the cigar from his mouth and leaned forward. "Before they come in, let me give you the whole picture. This moneybags I mentioned is camped in the canyon with his surveyors about five miles on the other side of the Cottrell ranch.

"I have the papers made out. You'll take them to him, tell him you bluffed me into letting you have them, and you're selling to him. Tell him any kind of a cock-and-bull yarn you want to, and he'll believe it because he wants that right of way. He just doesn't want to deal with me, and I suspect he figures he can polish me off after he gets his road built. Of course, that's another—"

"They're gone." Bragg plunged into the room, Slats a step behind. "Somebody smashed the windows, cut their ropes, and got them out."

IV

A LAUGH came out of Drake Gordon. "Where's that club now, judge?"

Random got to his feet, doubt written on his face, and then frank disbelief. "You must be mistaken. Nobody in this town would do that."

Outside a man raised a great cry. "You're done in Sager, Random."

As Random turned, a rock crashed through a window, glass showering him. He drew gun as Bragg and Slats ran to the front door. He said in the manner of one who still does not believe what he sees, "It can't be. Not in this town."

It was Freck standing at the window who called out. "It's Perkins, Dad. I'll get him."

Gordon pulled the gun out of his shirt the instant Freck fired. Bragg had jerked the front door open. Slats, standing beside Bragg, caught the motion of Gordon's arm and, whirling, pitched a quick shot. It was too quick, the slug missing Gordon by a foot and slapping into the wall behind him. Gordon laced a bullet into Slats' heart, and the room seemed to explode in Gordon's face. Bragg wheeled and fell before he could squeeze the trigger, but Freck and the judge, too, had turned with the sound of Gordon's shot, and Freck's bullet took him off his feet.

The odds had been four to one. Too long. Drake Gordon was a dead man. But he'd put Slats down, and by some unexplainable miracle, Bragg had fallen. Gordon was reaping the harvest of lead Nina had said he'd reap. Those were the fragments of thoughts in Gordon's mind as he fell. He went down on his face, the gun still clutched in his hand. The next bullet would be the end. There were the two of them, and the strength and the speed that it took to get them both were not in him.

But miracles were not over. There was more shooting. Somebody had come in. He was standing inside the front door. Over there where Slats and Bragg had fallen. Freck stumbled against the wall, blood spurting from his neck. His feet went out from under him and he fell sideways in a slow, toppling motion.

The black pit was there before Drake Gordon again. He felt the blood on his chest, the numbness as if a great blow had smashed against him, but his brain held tenaciously to consciousness. Judge Random was still on his feet, big body turning ponderously toward the door. The man standing there was still firing. Random flinched as the bullets struck him, but he kept his feet. Then his gun lashed out a foot-long tongue of flame. The man who had been firing cried out and fell.

It was as if Drake Gordon was seeing a grim and bloody drama being played out on the stage before him, and he was helpless to shape the course of that drama. But now there was only Judge Random in the room with him. The big man's gun was swinging toward him. The hammer of Gordon's own Colt was back; the sights lined on Random.

There was this short moment when his hand was steady. The gun roared, its thunder breaking into the dying echoes. Judge Random lurched with the impact of the slug. He dropped his .45, big hands clutching his desk. Then his grip loosened, and as if weary of life he fell back into his chair, weaved drunkenly for an instant, and then spilled onto the floor.

Gordon watched Random fall, his gun drooping in his hand. Slowly he brought his eyes toward the door, and the last thought that came to his numbed brain was how mistaken he had been in Bud Cottrell, for it was Bud who lay there, face down, his feet within inches of Bragg Random's still form.

Drake Gordon's tortured body could not have taken much more. Afterward the medico told him that only Nina's nursing had kept him alive. There were days when life was nothing more than a distorted passage of time in which he slept, ate a little, and slept a great deal more, but the day came when he wanted to know what had happened, and it was the marshal, Lance Perkins, who told him.

"I'M A special agent for the railroad," Perkins said. "I had to lie a little and falsify my credentials, but when I got done, the judge allowed I was mean enough to wear the star. The governor's had his eyes on this county for a long time, so I wound up being his agent to boot. My job was to get the evidence he needed to step in. I had a hell of a time getting it until you showed up.

"I doubt if I could have saved Bud's life because they had a lot of fixed evidence and with all of 'em lying about what they saw, he'd have had his neck stretched unless him and Nina signed up. Mebbe he would anyway. Then you poked your nose into things, and I was surprised."

Perkins grinned and reached for his pipe. "Drake, I don't mind telling you I've always figgered you was pretty low for a

fellow that kept on the right side of the law. You know, looking for bounty money and squeezing out the last damned nickel you could. Then you showed up after Bud, and I changed my mind about you."

"You tossed that gun at me?" Gordon asked him.

"I'm the huckleberry that done it. Likewise I got Nina and Bud out of Random's house. Then I kicked it open by heaving the rock and hollering, because I figured they'd be letting you have it. I made the mistake of forgetting there was a light behind me. I thought they'd come piling out, and we'd cut 'em down, but hell, one of 'em poked his gun through the window and creased me, so it was up to Bud to finish things. He done it, too. Now that it's over, it strikes me that the judge just got too confident after having things his own way all this time."

Gordon thought about what Perkins had said, and the changes which had come in him, changes of which he had not been fully aware. When Nina came with his supper, he reached for her hand. He said, "I've been doing a lot of thinking this afternoon. I see what you mean when you wrote that you didn't want to be brought down to my level, that level being a proposition of me killing for money on the law's side same as some men killed outside of the law."

Nina laid the tray on the bed and sat down. She said softly, "We've both had to change, Drake. It's been so long and we've both been so stubborn."

"Tell me about Random's right of way."

"He bulldozed everybody into practically giving him the right of way, but Bud and I wouldn't scare." She smiled. "We're stubborn, too."

"But you gave it to him that night because he was going to torture me?"

She nodded. "He made a lot of threats and I think he would have carried them out."

"Then the important thing is that you love me."

"Yes," she breathed, "and I'd like to take back that letter I wrote about you pulling me down to your level. I'd like to be lifted to the level of a man who would do what you did and for the reason you did."

"Then you'll marry me?"

"Any day you say."

She kissed him, and when she lifted her head he grinned at her. "I just thought of something, Nina. Won't we have the stubbornest youngsters in the state?"

A Brand for Colt Burning

By Joe Archibald

(Continued from page 41)

Perrin said, staring at the watch, "Wait, Ferg!" He picked it up and looked at it for a long time. "Where did you get this?"

"In Bexer's stuff, Sam."

Sam Perrin said, his eyes looking at, and through, Willet, "I remember givin' it to the little cuss the day before she took him away, Ferg. Kind of slowed him up when he walked, I said to her. Bexer, he was quite a man, Willet. They won't stop talkin' about what he did as long as we live. Don't matter what he was, Ferg, but what he showed us he could be. Thanks, Ferg."

It was more than a week later in Mayo City. Willet and a few of the Long S punchers were in the saloon. Punchers from distant spreads asked the Long S foreman to tell them about Bexer. They wanted to hear about that gunfight from a man who had been there, one who'd never been given to exaggerating.

Over at the Mayo House, four ranch owners, including Sam Perrin, were playing poker—and talking about their sons.

A Renegade Sides the Law

By
Wilson L. Covert

When outlaw Noll Archer fled back to home range, his loaded triggers got him beholden to the local sodbusters. So because he'd helped sow their crime crop, Noll had to hang around and help the sheriff Colt-scythe a bushwhacker harvest.

NOLL ARCHER'S return to Oak Creek wasn't planned. He saw the town sprawled in the sun as he dropped down the ridgeside, his horse tiring after the long chase. Sheriff Raymore and his deputies were half a day behind him. They had shot his four pals out of leather as they stuck up the Bald Butte stage, but he had miraculously escaped, lashing away into the night-shrouded hills.

That had been two days ago, but the lawmen hadn't given up. Familiar landmarks in Oak Creek Valley had revived memories of Archer's range-riding days. He was still a young man, but felt old after what he'd been through in recent years. He'd left the old range looking for excitement and found it. He had also found what it was like to be a hunted man. Crumpled in a hip pocket was a notice of reward for himself and

pals. He had ripped it from a tree trunk. The sheriff was aiming to collect that bounty.

As he headed for the town, Noll's thoughts were of old friends, particularly his sidekick, Chet Carlisle. They had punched cattle together for Chet's old man, a well-to-do cowman. Always restless, Noll had wanted Chet to hit the trail with him. But Chet said no, he guessed he'd stay and help the old man. Chet had had good sense, thought Noll. If he had done as Noll urged, Chet would have fallen in with the same wild bunch; he'd either be dead or running from the law, like Noll.

Archer looked the town over hungrily. Some of the old faces were there, a lot of new ones. He asked about Chet Carlisle. Yes, they said, Chet was still around. Bossing the old ranch, now that his father was dead.

"Chet's havin' homesteader trouble," remarked the blacksmith. "His range is so big, he's been leasin' part of it to homesteaders. But they steal his cattle, some of 'em, and he has to get rid of 'em."

Archer would have liked to stay a while, but didn't want the sheriff trapping him in town. He struck across the valley, easily recalling the trail to the Broken Rail ranch. He came to fenced sections of land, something new since the days when he'd been cowprod for the brand. This spelled sodbusters.

Further proof of homesteader occupation appeared in the shape of a large frame shack, with a corral and a small barn nearby. There were cattle in the corral, horsemen and three people on foot at the gate. Voices were raised in altercation. One of the riders, gesturing toward the penned stock, suddenly vacated his saddle. Another man climbed down. The gate in the barbed wire fence stood wide. Archer, wondering if Chet was with the horsebackers, turned from the road through the opening.

The voices came clearer, he noticed a tall, slim girl, with shoulder-length hair, standing with hands clenched. A farmer-ish-looking oldster, who might have been her father, was arguing heatedly with a bull-necked fellow in checked shirt and chaps. Suddenly the girl's voice cut through their raucous speech:

"You know very well, Huggins, we never took your cattle!"

"Then how'd they get here?" retorted Huggins. "Just walk in and close the gate on themselves? Instead of hornin' in, Miss Farlan, you and your ma best go and pack your things!"

"My lease ain't run but three months and I paid in advance for a year," cried the farmer. "Even if I got my money back, I wouldn't leave, for the crops are planted. I hadn't a thing to do with them steers."

"You'll go," rasped Huggins, "and be glad we don't hang you!"

The oldster swiped at the gun on his hip. As he drew he was thrown off balance by the girl's sudden lunge to grasp his gunarm. An elderly woman cried out, "Don't you, pa!"

Even though it looked certain that the lithe Miss Farlan would wrest the weapon from her father, Noll Archer saw Huggins give his nearest companion the nod. The latter, dark-faced and bandy-legged, whipped out a Colt. His first shot went wild, due to the violent motions of the Farlans. As he fired again, another gun tuned up, and he buckled forward.

APPROACHING unnoticed, his horse at a shuffling walk, Archer hit the ground, smoke-wisping gun in hand. The bow-legged man pushed up on one arm, his beadlike eyes seeking the lead-slinger who had dropped him. He raised his Colt with an effort, flame spat from the muzzle. Noll drilled a hole between his eyes, swung a .45 to cover Huggins and the other cowhands.

"Steady, now!" he rapped. "Where's Carlisle?"

"At the ranch," gritted Huggins. "Who're you? You killed Stovall!"

"Sad but true," said Archer. "If I hadn't, the girl and the old man would both be dead. I saw you nod to Stovall, though she was tryin' to disarm her pappy. I'm an old friend of Chet's. Unless he's changed a lot, he wouldn't stand

for such doin's. You work for him, do you?"

"I'm his range boss, Pima Huggins," said the bull-necked man. "Chet's been leasin' to sodbusters, but they rustle his stock. There," Huggins flung an arm corralward, "you can see for yourself! Six Broken Rail steers—"

"Don't you believe him, mister," broke in the girl. "I'm beginning to see through Carlisle's game. The farmer who leased this quarter-section before us was chased out for the same reason — stealing Broken Rail cattle. We thought maybe it was true. But, now that it's happened to us, it looks like Carlisle works the same trick on everybody."

"That's a lie!" fumed Pima Huggins.

Archer frowned. "Anyway, these folks ain't movin' till I've seen Chet. Get your steers and get goin'."

Pima eyed him a moment. "If you're a friend of Chet's, we'll see you at the ranch and settle this." He stooped and lifted Stovall across his saddle. "Open that gate, boys."

Noll kept his gun bared until riders and cattle were a hundred yards up the range. Then he faced the Farlans, who had watched proceedings tensely. The girl's name was Viola. Noll, as she put her hand in his, thanking him, bitterly regretted his outlaw status. He had closed the door to happiness with such a girl long ago. It was perhaps only a matter of days, of hours, before the law rode him down. But the desire seized him to straighten out affairs for Viola and her family while there was yet time. Jasper Farlan was no cow thief, of that Noll was convinced.

Archer didn't linger at the homestead, though the Farlans pressed him to remain for supper. He saw no sign of the cattle crew.

Some time after crossing a ridge south of the homestead, a wagon and team halted at the roadside drew his attention. A lean, nut-brown man was patting a mound of earth with a spade. A woman in sunbonnet and calico stood at his side in mournful attitude. As the prop of hoofs reached them, both looked up. Noll, checking his mount, thought he had never seen more sorrowful faces.

"Ain't you done enough to us?" the man spoke in a low, wrathful voice. "Can't we bury our dead in peace?"

The woman regarded Noll closely. "He's not one of them, pa."

"I'm not a Broken Rail hand, if that's what you mean," said Archer, removing his hat. "Somebody been killed?"

"Our two sons," nodded the woman, tears coursing down weathered cheeks. "We're the Brimleys, what's left of 'em. We leased a quarter-section from Mr. Carlisle four months ago. This mornin', Huggins, his foreman, came and found some Broken Rail cows in our barn. Don't know how they got there."

"Carlisle's men put 'em there," Brimley cut in fiercely, "but we couldn't prove it! The boys would fight, resentin' the charge we was rustlin, though ma and me argued for 'em not to. They was shot down like dogs, then Huggins ordered us to load the wagon and get off the range."

Archer's mind was a ferment. It was difficult for him to fit the smiling Chet of the old days into this infamous setup, but Pima Huggins could scarcely be acting without Chet's knowledge. Expressing his sympathy for the Brimleys, Arther drew a spur along his horse's flank. When he looked back, the homesteaders were kneeling beside the grave. Riding into the Broken Rail yard after sunset, Noll didn't experience the pleasure he had anticipated in revisiting the familiar scene. Some of the smaller buildings looked new, but the house was the same old vine-covered, rambling structure. He tied his horse at the well-chewed hitching post. A voice grated on his ears:

"Hands in the air, hombre, and state your business!"

Archer clasped hands on his hat, peering at the vine-shaded porch. He made out the figure of a man with a carbine clamped against his hip.

"What're you afraid of, Chet?" he asked, with a low laugh.

Carlisle advanced to the edge of the porch, his eyes wide, mouth half open

in surprise. He looked older, of course, and there was a hardness about him totally different from the Carlisle that Noll had known. "I want to be sure my ears ain't trickin' me. You're Noll Archer!"

"Thought your man Pima would've told you," grinned Noll. "I met him."

"Pima ain't back yet," replied Chet, hurrying down the steps to pump Noll's hand. "Where you been keepin' yourself, fellow? I wasn't sure but you were one of the cow-liftin' homesteaders I've been leasin' land to. They get mad when I put 'em off the range, and some are quick with a gun."

CARLISLE yelled to a ranch hand to care for Archer's horse. Appearing genuinely pleased to see Noll again, he led him inside and lighted a lamp. Cooking odors emanated from the kitchen. Chet studied Noll's brown features, not less hard than his own, and shook his head, smiling.

"I can hardly believe it's you, Noll. You look sort of—well, stony-eyed. Made your fortune?"

"All I've got to show for my rovin' is the bronc and the clothes I'm wearin'." Noll hesitated to tell Chet what he had really been doing. "Changed some yourself. By the way, what about these homesteaders? You sure all of 'em are cattle thieves?"

"Not all, of course," replied Chet. "I try to weed out the thieves and lease to honest plowmen in their place. Why do you ask?"

Noll told him about the Farlans and the Brimleys. Chet got out of his chair, began to pace the floor, before Noll had finished. "The dang blockheads!" muttered Carlisle.

"Who?" queried Archer.

"My men! They ought've known better than to—" He caught Archer's intent look. "I mean the Farlans are undoubtedly honest. The Brimleys are a different breed altogether. I'll have to apologize to Jase Farlan for Huggins' blunder."

Noll said, "I had to kill one of your men, Stovall by name, to save the girl and her father."

Carlisle stopped his pacing. "Reason enough and I've no kick. But Stovall was a great pal of Pima's."

Just then the Chinese cook announced supper. Noll had had little to eat in more than forty-eight hours and did full justice to the meal. As they returned to the living room, the door opened suddenly and Pima Huggins stepped in. He shot a grim look at Archer.

"I wasn't sure you'd show up! Have you told the boss—"

Carlisle broke in angrily, "Yes, he's told me what happened at the Farlans', Pima. Noll Archer is an old friend of mine. You jumped the wrong people."

"But—" Huggins began truculently.

"Don't you start anything!" Carlisle reached the bull-necked man in two strides, pushed him out of the door and followed.

Noll moved fast as the door closed behind them. He caught Huggins' angry protest as they crossed the porch, "You never gave orders not to—" Carlisle quickly interrupted, "I thought you understood the Farlans were to be left alone, boxhead!" They passed down the steps, out of hearing.

Noll was seated, smoking, when Chet came back. He said he expected Archer to stay overnight, at least. Noll knew he would risk capture by Sheriff Raymore, but, after some hesitation, decided to remain. He had learned enough about Carlisle's present business to want to know more. Chet ushered him to a back bedroom. Noll, worn out with his long flight, was glad to tumble into bed. Despite Pima's enmity, he felt reasonably safe from him under Chet's roof and went instantly to sleep.

It seemed but a short time later that some sound awoke him. He felt for the six-shooter at the head of his bed as he raised up cautiously. His groping hand found no gun. There were two figures between him and the smoking oil lamp on the bureau. At the slight creaking of the bed, they wheeled. Noll saw that Huggins held a gun on him.

"Make a fuss and I'll bore you, owl-hooter!" barked Huggins.

"I don't get you," said Noll, easing down on an elbow. Then he noticed his trousers lying on the floor, that Carlisle had a rumpled paper in his hand. Noll inwardly cursed himself for keeping that reward poster.

"Looks like you're wanted by the law, Noll," Chet said, with a twisted grin. "Description of a road agent here that fits you, though you ain't mentioned by name. How come you didn't tell me?"

"It's nothin' to be proud of, Chet."

"I'll agree it ain't, Noll. You looked so tough and took so long to make up your mind about stayin', I suspected you were dodgin' the law. Swiped your gun and went through your clothes to see what I could find."

"Now that you know," said Noll, "what will you do about it?"

"Only one thing for a law-abidin' citizen to do," grinned Chet.

Ignoring Huggins' gun, Archer flung off the bed clothes and his bare feet slapped the floor. "You'd turn me in, me, your old saddlemate? It's blood money you're after, Chet!"

"You're worth quite a sum," admitted Carlisle. "And friendship don't count when one of us is an outlaw."

"Both, you mean!" snarled Noll. "When I headed for the Broken Rail, to see you for the last time, I was thinkin' what a mess I'd made of my life, that you had done the wise thing by not joinin' me in my travels. But now, discoverin' how you're swindlin' the homesteaders, I figure you're even a worse renegade than me. You get their money, plant rustlin' evidence as an excuse to run 'em out or kill 'em, then lease the land over again to a new bunch!"

"Your imagination's runnin' riot, Noll!" Chet said in a hard voice. "Keep that gun on him, Pima, while I tie him to the bed."

ARCHER expected to land in the Oak Creek jail before noon the next day. But Carlisle, Huggins and the hands were busy somewhere until late afternoon—running out more homesteaders, Noll was sure. The Chinese cook, left to guard the prisoner, pretended not to understand English when Noll tried to talk him into releasing him. Sheriff Raymore didn't show up, and Archer wondered if he had lost the trail.

Returning to the ranch, Carlisle and his men ate a hasty supper. Chet ordered Huggins and another man to take Archer to the Oak Creek lockup. He, Carlisle, intending shaving and paying the Farlans a visit, but would join his men in town afterward. With his hands tied, Noll was led from the house, mounted on his own horse. He wasn't roped in the saddle. They had ridden several miles when Pima began to talk in a way to justify Noll's uneasiness since leaving the ranch.

"Accordin' to that reward notice, this Archer's worth as much dead as alive, Saginaw."

"Yeh," chuckled Huggins' companion. "I see what you mean."

"Stovall and me was pards for ten years," Pima went on. "Archer not only shoots too straight but he talks too much. Chet won't care if he's killed, long as we collect the reward. Archer, how'd you like to ride a little in advance? I don't like to shoot so close as to smoke up your shirt. It's got to look like you was downed tryin' to escape."

Noll didn't answer. They were riding the crest of a ridge, with sharply sloping sides. Not more than a mile or two north lay the Farlan homestead. He was thinking fast when Huggins cut his mount with a quirt. With a snort, the animal bounded along the ridge. Noll leaned low, just as Pima's six-shooter banged. The bullet ripped the back of Archer's shirt. Employing knee pressure, he turned the bronc from the ridge trail, Pima's slugs humming about horse and rider.

Noll hugged leather as the bronc went headlong down the steep, brushy slant. He might have stayed in the saddle if the horse hadn't lost its footing. As it nosedived, he managed to roll clear, digging in peg heels to keep from plunging after it. The horse righted itself a little

farther on, gained the bottom of the slope and went on at a panicky run.

With their mounts slipping and sliding, Huggins and Saginaw passed the brush-hidden Archer in a cloud of dust. Evidently they hadn't seen Noll's horse take a tumble. Guns cracked flatly as the pair struck the level and spurred after the riderless animal. Archer lost no time in descending the slope. The pounding of guns and hoofs died away in the east as he went at a dog trot in the direction of the Farlan homestead. A gleam of light from a window told him he hadn't misjudged its location. A little later he was kicking on the shack door.

It widened on a crack, and Farlan's face appeared behind a gun. Viola, looking over his shoulder, suddenly pushed him aside for Noll to enter.

"Are you escaping from the sheriff?" Viola asked breathlessly.

Noll stared, his heart thumping. "Sheriff? No, runnin' from Pima Huggins, who was tryin' to murder me. What about the sheriff?"

"He was here this afternoon," spoke up Jasper Farlan, "huntin' a feller who looks like you. We heard the shootin' out yonder. We ain't harborin' no outlaws, if that's what you are, Archer."

"He said it was Pima Huggins, dad," said Viola. "I believe him."

"Two of 'em," said Noll. "Let me stay here till they get out of the neighborhood. I have no horse, no gun, and my hands are tied. You were right about Chet Carlisle, Miss Viola."

"Thought he was your friend," Jase Farlan's eyes narrowed.

"He's a friend to nobody but himself." Noll told what he had pieced together at the ranch. "Chet's comin' here tonight. It seems Huggins made a mistake, that you folks ain't to be bothered." He glanced at Viola, who was untying his hands. "I can guess why."

The girl flushed. "There, you're free. Go into the back room, Noll."

Jasper Farlan objected, sure that Archer was the young outlaw described by Sheriff Raymore. Viola and her mother sharply reminded the oldster that Archer had stood their friend when they needed one. While Farlan fumed, his daughter pushed Noll into the rear room and shut the door.

NOT long afterward Noll heard someone ride up to the shack. The voice of Carlisle fell on Archer's ear. Chet expressed deep regret over the actions of his range boss, saying he didn't know how the six steers had got into the Farlan corral, but he was certain of old Jasper's innocence.

"What about this Archer, who claimed to be a friend of yours?" Farlan asked.

"He used to be," replied Chet, "but he's been robbin' stages with a gang somewhere. I sent him to town under guard of Pima and Saginaw."

"Well, Archer escaped 'em," said Farlan. "I don't want no truck with owl-hooters. He's hidin' in the back room."

"Dad!" cried Viola, and whirled to put her back against the door.

"Has he a gun?" Chet asked in a sharper tone. "No?" He pulled his six-shooter, advanced a pace or two. "Get away from the door, Viola!"

Noll, on the other side of the door, wished that he was armed. He would have welcomed a shoot-out with Chet. There were sounds of a scuffle as old Jase aided Carlisle in removing the girl. She screamed, "Run, Noll!"

He darted to the back window, raised the sash. He was dropping into the yard when a Colt roared behind him. A follow-up shot came as he sprinted past the corral. He ran a hundred yards farther, then, hearing no one in pursuit, stopped.

Warily Archer returned toward the ranch. Carlisle and old Farlan might be lying low to sieve him. He hadn't forgotten that Huggins and Saginaw must be somewhere in the vicinity, unless his bronc had led them a long chase. As he retraced his steps, Noll observed two people in the yard, one leading a mount. Creeping to the corral, Archer squatted in its shadow and listened to the murmur of voices.

"If that's the way you feel about it, Viola," Chet's voice lifted in sudden anger, "I'll say good night and get on after that bandit!"

He swung to leather and pounded by the corral. Waiting until the darkness had swallowed him, Noll stepped out. Viola had started down the yard, but at Archer's low call she came running back.

"Oh, Noll, you must get away!" she said excitedly. "There's no excuse for dad acting as he did. The house isn't safe. Saddle my horse while I get you a shooting-iron."

"You had words with Chet," remarked Noll, "and he went away mad."

"Yes. He asked me to marry him. I not only refused, but told him I believed he was swindling the homesteaders."

"Not the wisest thing to say, Viola. Still, he'd be sure to get rid of your family like he has the others, since you turned him down. His hope of marryin' you was your only protection."

"You may be right, Noll. Rig that bronc. Saddle's on the fence."

She walked swiftly houseward and he turned back to the corral. Archer was waiting beside the saddled horse when Viola rejoined him, thrusting a six-shooter in his empty holster.

"I'm not sure I'll be able to return the horse and the gun, Viola," said Noll, "but I'll try hard. I seem to've stirred up a hornets' nest."

"Don't worry about us," she replied. "Look out for yourself."

Archer headed back toward the ridge. He had no definite plan as he drifted west along the ridge crest. The sheriff and Carlisle were both after him, yet he refused to flee the valley, sure that the Farlans were in a precarious situation.

From the high trail he presently spied the tiny glow of a campfire. It appeared to be at the spot where the Brimleys had buried their two sons. Having nowhere to go, perhaps the homesteader and his wife had camped by the grave. On sudden impulse, Noll sent his horse down the ridge side.

Reassured by the sight of the wagon tilt billowing in the wind, Archer rode up to the fire. He could hear horses stamping in the darkness to one side, but thought they were the wagon team. Brimley and his wife, standing by the fire, looked at him a bit queerly. "Didn't expect to run onto you folks again," said Noll, swinging down. "I just came from the Farlan homestead. They had a little trouble with Carlisle's outfit, too, and are likely to have more. I heard the sheriff was ridin' the valley. I'm sure he'd help you homesteaders if he knew what was goin' on."

"We've seen him," said Brimley. "Told him what happened."

SOMETHING in the farmer's manner warned Noll. He spun toward the wagon, throwing hand to Colt butt. Sheriff Raymore, walrus mustache twisting, stood by a rear wheel, leveling blued steel at Archer.

"Don't draw, feller, or we'll whipsaw you! My deputies are on the other side of the fire. Heard you comin'. It's the end of a long chase."

Noll slowly raised his hands. "All right, Raymore. One way, I'm glad it's over, and I have a chance to talk to you."

"What about?" asked the sheriff, moving quickly to jerk the gun from his scabbard. The two deputies shuffled to the fire.

"Well," said Archer, "you heard how the Brimley boys were killed. They hadn't stole any Broken Rail steers. That's Carlisle's underhand game to drive out one bunch of homesteaders and bring in another. It's worse than robbin' stages, if you ask me."

Sheriff Raymore frowned. "Pretty hard to prove on Carlisle."

"Don't believe you know my name, sheriff. It's Archer. Chet and me were pals one time. Maybe it wouldn't be so hard to get the goods on Chet. Viola Farlan won't have him for a husband, so the Farlans will be the next to go. Havin' planted steers in their corral once, he won't pull that again. He'll just ride up some night and kill 'em off."

"I'd like to be there when he tries it," the sheriff said, bleakly.

"That's what I'm suggestin', Raymore. It may happen as soon as tomorrow night. I'm askin' you to let me do some

of the shootin' when Carlisle comes."

"We'll see," the sheriff scratched his head, "though I don't understand a renegade like you wantin' to, unless it's on the girl's account."

Brimley, grim-faced, spoke to the lawman. "For the sake of them dead boys, I want to take a hand, too."

Noll Archer slept with handcuffs on that night. In the morning, the Brimleys accompanied the law riders and their prisoner across the ridge to the Farlan homestead. Noll kept looking at his manacled hands.

"Sheriff, if I give my word not to break away, will you take these things off? I don't like Viola Farlan to see me wearin' them. She's not sure I'm an outlaw."

Raymore hesitated, then fished out the handcuff key. "I knew the girl figured in the case. I'll put 'em back on when we've finished the Carlisle business. Here's your cutter."

Trotting ahead of the wagon, the horsemen found the Farlans grouped in the front yard. Old Jase exclaimed, "Caught that owlhooter, didn't you, sheriff?"

"Does Archer look like a prisoner?" retorted Raymore. "He answers the road agent's description in a general way, but he's not the feller we're after. He tells me you folks are in danger."

"Danger?" repeated Farlan. "We had some trouble with Broken Rail riders the other day, but Carlisle fixed that up."

Noll's eyes were on Viola. Her face had lighted up at the sheriff's words. As Noll slid down in the yard, the girl said, "I'm so glad you weren't the man."

Archer felt grateful to Raymore. Viola would remember him kindly when he finally rode away to serve a jail sentence.

Since Carlisle's visit the previous night, Jase Farlan had his doubts that Chet meant to attack him. Though it wasn't certain the Broken Rail men would come that night, the homestead defenders prepared for it. Shortly after dark, Archer, Sheriff Raymore, and Brimley climbed into the latter's wagon, parked in the front yard. The two deputies remained in the house with the Farlans and Mrs. Brimley.

When hoofbeats sounded on the road westward, Archer nudged the sheriff, "They ain't wastin' any time!" Peering over the wagon seat, he saw riders pull up and dismount outside the fence. They filed quietly through the gateway and stopped. A single figure approached the dark shack, tried the locked door, then rapped loudly, calling:

"Everybody in bed?"

Noll thought, "The treacherous houn'! Playin' friendly, so Jase will let 'em in to massacre the whole family!"

Brimley also recognized Chet's voice. His gun boomed. Carlisle whirled with a startled oath, but didn't fall. In his haste, Brimley apparently had missed.

"Look out for that wagon!" Carlisle yelled to his men. Three Colts opened up from the front windows as he plunged for the corner of the shack. But again he shaved disaster, his six-gun spitting flame where he crouched against the side wall.

THE Broken Rail men scattered, triggering at the covered wagon. One side of the tilt had been rolled up on the bows. Three .45's lashed lead at the darting forms. Hoarse cries, the thud of toppling bodies attested to the sure aim of the sheriff's party. Guns at the shack windows raked the gang, further reducing the number that scuttled to join Chet at the side of the house. The firing lulled, and Carlisle shouted:

"This is your doin', Noll Archer! I reckon you picked up your stage robber pals mentioned in the poster. I'll make you a proposition. Help me clean out these homesteaders and I'll give the bunch of you steady work. We'll forget there's a price on your head."

Noll squeezed the sheriff's arm before Raymore could speak. He answered Carlisle, "The way you treated me, Chet, I ain't sure I could trust you."

"Let's talk it over," Chet called back. "The two of us. You game?"

"Cover me," Archer whispered to the sheriff, starting to climb over the side

of the wagon. He raised his voice, "I'm comin' out, Chet."

He saw Carlisle advancing from the corner of the house as he hit the ground. "If I'm fired on, my men will burn you down!" warned Chet.

Not answering, Noll moved steadily to meet him. Chet's right arm hung down, but Noll knew there was a gun in his hand, concealed by the wing of his chaps. Midway between the house and the wagon, they faced each other. Carlisle's voice came low and derisive as he swung up his pistol, "What a sucker you are, Noll! Walk back with me. I'm holdin' you till your outlaw pals pull out, then finishin' you and the Farlans!"

"Made a slight mistake, Chet," replied Archer. "My road agent friends are dead. The men with me are Sheriff Raymore and his deputies, and Brimley, the sodbuster. They won't pull out till they've got you."

He heard Chet's sharply indrawn breath. "Well, I can kill you and run for it, Noll, with the boys coverin' me!"

A gun roared, once, twice. Chet slowly folded at Noll's feet, smoke-iron slipping from his hand. He had been sure he could sieve Noll before the latter drew. Noll hadn't attempted to draw, but tipped up his holster and fired through the bottom. He yanked the gun clear for further execution as the Broken Rail outlaws swarmed toward him, shooting, throwing caution aside when they saw Carlisle fall.

Noll heard Pima Huggins' voice rise to a shriek of agony. Then the thunder of guns drowned out all other sounds. From house and wagon, bullets chopped down the rushing figures. Not a Broken Rail man reached Archer.

He stood with empty gun as a light went on in the house. The door swung open, Farlan and the deputies stepped forth with smoke curling from their pistols. Behind them pressed Viola. Noll handed her the empty Colt as she reached his side.

"I put it to good use," he said, trying to smile. "Don't expect I'll see you again. I'm ridin' with the sheriff."

He turned away before she could speak, seeking the sheriff. Raymore was just coming over the tailgate of the wagon.

"I'm ready to go when you are, Raymore."

The peace officer gave him a long look. "You've aided the law in cleanin' up a pretty mess, Archer. I think you'd make a solid citizen if you took up a quarter-section and married that girl. Get goin'." He gave Archer a friendly shove.

Noll found Viola standing where he had left her. "Sorry I walked off so sudden, but I thought the sheriff wanted me to ride back with him."

She didn't answer for a moment. "You really were a bandit, Noll?"

Noll gulped. "Yes. Raymore said to take up a quarter-section and—"

He felt Viola's hand meet his own and tighten. "The sheriff thinks you've earned your freedom and a chance to make good. So do I. And if you want a partner to help you run your homestead —well, I'm waiting to hear you say so."

Bullet Blunder

By Gunnison Steele

Honest Sam Torget had to use a snake trick himself to flush a six-gun sidewinder out of his bushwhack den.

IT WAS well after dark, but with a yellow moon rising out of the desert, when old Sam Torget rode into the town of Lockspur. Behind him he led a horse that carried a still, blanket-wrapped figure on its saddle.

The rawboned, mustached oldster paused at the darkened sheriff's office, dismounted, knocked on the door. When he received no answer, he angled across the street toward the lights of the Bullshead Saloon, leading the horses. A cowboy coming out of the Bullshead saw him, stopped, peering at the horse that carried the still figure.

"What you got there, Sam?" he asked.

"My partner, Two-Lakes Hannigan," Sam said stiffly. "He's dead. Where's the sheriff?"

"Why, I ain't seen him about lately." The cowboy yelled back over his shoulder, "Hey, fellas! Here's Sam Torget, and he's got old Two-Lakes tied to a saddle. Two-Lakes is dead!"

There was a stir inside the saloon, and perhaps a dozen men came out into the street. They gathered quickly about Sam and the two horses, limned darkly in the lamplight that flowed from the Bullshead, and started firing questions at the oldster. Sam's bony face showed grim and gray, and he seemed dazed.

Among the men was blocky, red-faced Town Marshal Ben Kirk. Kirk was a blustery, arrogant man, but competent at keeping peace in the town. Now he lifted a corner of the blanket and peered underneath it.

"Dead, all right," he grunted. "How'd it happen, Sam?"

"I—I don't rightly know," Sam mumbled. He staggered a little. "I found Two-Lakes out on the trail."

"Here, come inside and have a drink," a spectator said kindly. "It'll brace you up. Here, let me help you."

The lanky oldster jerked loose from the hand, said fiercely, "I don't need help! But I believe I will have a nip."

He went into the saloon, followed by the increasing crowd. The bartender poured him a drink of whisky and he gulped it down. It brought color to his face, and he straightened and looked slowly about the room.

"Where's Tim Ryan?" he repeated.

"Why, the sheriff's out at his outfit, the Circle Dot," Marshal Kirk declared. "Left about sundown. He spends his nights there, you know, when nothin's pressin'. Did Two-Lakes have an accident?"

"Some slime-bellied snake murdered him!" Sam said flatly.

A murmur of surprise filtered through the crowd. Ben Kirk's pale eyes narrowed coldly. It was the marshal's boast that no crime had gone unsolved in his town since he'd been in office.

"You sure of that, Sam?"

"Yeah, I'm sure! He was shot in the back."

"Where'd it happen?"

"On the trail between here and our outfit, among them bluffs just this side of Hungry Creek. Two-Lakes rode into town early this mornin'. He aimed to bring back five hundred dollars from the bank which we aimed to pay for some feeders which we'd bought from Jim Banner with. He was due back by noon, and by mid-afternoon I begun to get uneasy. I figured maybe Two-Lakes'd got a few drinks under his belt and got into a poker game—"

"That's just what happened," Kirk cut in. "He got pretty drunk, and got in a stud game with Joe Karnes and Rufe Cain. Joe quit early, but Two-Lakes and Rufe played till sundown. Two-Lakes won maybe three-four hundred dollars off Rufe."

EVERY man in the room had turned and was looking at a slender dark-faced man with a scar on one cheek at the edge of the crowd. Rufe Cain, who owned a run-down outfit north of town, stared back defiantly.

"So what?" he sneered. "You accusin' me of murder?"

"Not yet," Kirk growled. "What else, Sam?"

"Well, a little before sundown I got so worried I saddled my gray and started out to look for Two-Lakes," Sam Torget said, downing his second drink. "And I found him, like I said, layin' on the trail just this side of Hungry Creek, shot in the back!"

"He have any money on him?"

"Not a red cent. His horse was grazin' close by, so I—"

"Half the town knew he had close to a thousand dollars on him when he left just after sundown," declared the red-faced town marshal. He turned and stared at Rufe Cain. "Likewise they know that you and old Two-Lakes had a quarrel, Rufe, when Two-Lakes caught you sneakin' an ace off the bottom."

"That was his story," Cain said flatly. "And a lie! The old coot was drunk—"

"I've got to see the sheriff," Sam Torget cut in loudly.

"We don't need the sheriff—I'll take charge here," Marshal Kirk said, hitching at his silver-handled gun and glowering about the room. "I'll find the skunk that killed pore Two-Lakes, and when I do—"

"I know who killed him!"

The room got very quiet. Kirk, starting to bang his fist against the bar, froze motionless. Rufe Cain's lips peeled back from his teeth in a grimace.

"What's that?" Kirk demanded. "You know who done it?"

"That's right," Sam declared grimly, motioning for the bottle again. "The murderin' son made a little mistake. He didn't make sure Two-Lakes was plumb dead. Scared and in a hurry, I reckon. Anyway, Two-Lakes was still breathin' when I found him. He lived just long enough to name the snake that done for him!"

"Who was it?" Kirk spat, hand on his gun.

"I ain't sayin'," the oldster said slowly. "You're just a town marshal, Kirk. You got no jurisdiction over crimes committed outside the town limits. I'll name the dirty son, all right, but to nobody but Sheriff Tim Ryan."

"But the sheriff's eight miles away, at his ranch."

"Then I'll ride out there. I got plenty of time—most as much as Two-Lakes has—and I don't reckon the killer'll get far if he tries to run."

"But that's foolish, Sam," a rancher argued. "Name the skunk, and if he's in

town we'll arrest 'im and hold 'im till the sheriff gets here."

Old Sam shook his head stubbornly. "Maybe he's in town—maybe here in this room—and maybe he's twenty miles away. I ain't sayin'. And I ain't talkin' to nobody but the sheriff."

"You stubborn ol' hellion!" Kirk said angrily. "I got a good mind to lock you up for obstructin' justice!"

"I reckon you won't." Sam looked bleakly about him, his gaze pausing briefly on Rufe Cain. "I aim to take Two-Lakes to the undertaker's now. And then, after I get some things at Jeb Winkler's store, I aim to head out to Sheriff Ryan's ranch."

The oldster turned abruptly and stalked out. Those who watched him curiously saw him lead the horse bearing the body of his partner, Two-Lakes Hannigan, along the street and stop before Doc Shane's office and undertaking parlor. A few moments later he came out and angled across the street, pausing before Jeb Winkler's general merchandise store.

Sam paid a towheaded youngster fifty cents to take his gray and Two-Lakes' roan to the livery and water them. Sam went inside. When he left, twenty minutes later, he went through a back door.

ALL was quiet there in the shallow canyon. The moon, now high in the sky, sprayed silvery light down on the dim trail that snaked along the canyon floor. The man huddled there on the rock ledge above the trail stirred uneasily.

It seemed to the bushwhacker that he'd been there a long time, waiting for old Sam Torget. Then suddenly he tensed as the sound of hoofs came to his ears.

The hoofbeats grew steadily louder. And then a horse and rider rounded a bend in the trail and came slowly toward him. Momentarily they were in deep shadows cast by towering pines overhanging the trail. But the man on the ledge, crouched with gun in hand, could see that the horse was a skinny gray.

The rider sat stiffly in the saddle. But the waiting man could see old Sam's frayed black coat, his floppy old hat that half concealed the rider's face. There was no doubt about its being Sam's gray.

The bushwhacker's gun muzzle lowered; he pulled the trigger. Lead-fanged flame lashed out, and gun thunder roared along the shallow canyon as the bushwhacker slammed three bullets into the figure on the horse.

The figure jerked sideways in the saddle, swayed violently, tumbled to the ground. The old gray horse jumped, then stopped and stood trembling, partially concealing the still figure on the ground.

Peering through gunsmoke, the bushwhacker quickly clambered onto the trail.

A harsh voice spat, "Freeze, you murderin' hound, or I'll blow you apart!"

The bushwhacker spat like a startled tomcat, leaped backward, whirling in mid-air, his gun muzzle swiveling. Dimly he saw a tall figure standing in the shadows cast by the pines, and he knew that he had been tricked. He knew that this man had been following behind the gray.

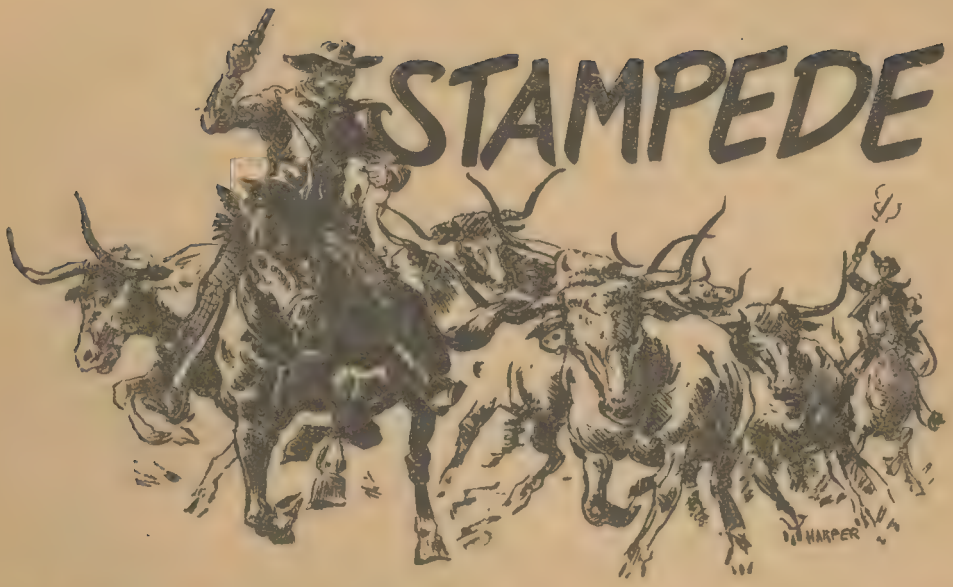
His gun blasted, but he'd fired wildly and he knew he had missed. Then he saw flame lash wickedly out at him, felt the violent slam of lead against his shoulder, heard the bellowing roar of a gun. Then he knew he was down on the ground, not unconscious but without a gun now.

Old Sam Torget came from the shadows and stood looking down at the moaning bushwhacker.

"So it was you that done it, Ben Kirk," he said grimly. "Can't say I'm much surprised, at that. Figured my little trick would flush out of his den the sidewinder that murdered pore Two-Lakes and robbed him. No, I didn't know who it was. Two-Lakes was stone dead when I found him on the trail. I told that yarn, figurin' whoever had done it would try another killin' to keep me from gettin' to the sheriff with what he thought I knew. And, by jicks, it worked!"

"But—but that gent on the horse?"

"Thought it was me?" Old Sam chuckled a little. "Wasn't nothin' but an old clothes dummy I borrowed from Jeb Winkler, rigged up with my coat and hat and wired in the saddle. If you've ruined it, by grabs, I aim to make you pay Jeb for it before you hang!"



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Write to a regular rannyhan.

Dear Bill:

Maybe there are those amongst the readers of WESTERN TRAILS who have a longer record than I have. But I still think mine is a good one. My first copy was July, 1929.

Every copy has been read from cover to cover. Finding no stories I did not like, I'm always hard put to it to decide if there were any better than the others. Oh, I like some plots better than others, to be sure, but plot for plot, they are all well done.

I'd like some pen pals as I like to make new friends, but I wonder if it would do me any good to ask.

Anyway, keep up the good work.

Sincerely,
LOUIS HAMM
P. O. Box 1786
Milwaukee 2, Wis.

Come on, all you pen-pushers.

Dear Bill:

I have just started reading WESTERN TRAILS and find that I like it very much.

I am thirty-four years old, have dark brown hair and eyes, weigh 137 pounds, and am six feet tall. I like to dance, swim, ride horseback, and play baseball. I also like to write letters and receive them.

Sincerely yours,
LUTHER J. LINDSEY
427 E. Gregory St.
Pensacola, Fla.

Send some mail to a blue-eyed gal.

Dear Bill:

I have been reading WESTERN TRAILS magazine for some time now and do enjoy it very much. I was wondering if there is room for me in the *Stampede* section.

I'm eighteen, have brown hair and blue eyes. My height is five feet, six inches, and I weigh 137 pounds. I would like pen pals from everywhere. So come and fill my mailbox. I will answer all letters I receive.

Sincerely,
CLARA MUNN
R. D. 1
Wilson, N. Y.

Cheer up a lonesome pal.

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zine. It rates tops for me and will for quite some time, I'm sure.

I would like to join the pen pards and will gladly answer any letters that are written to me. I am sixteen, with dark brown hair and blue eyes. I weigh 128 pounds and am five feet, three inches tall.

A lonesome pal,

ELEANOR STEBBINS
5 Fairview Ave.
Jamestown, N. Y.

Many pen pals wanted.

Dear Bill:

I have been reading WESTERN TRAILS for some time and like it very much.

My pastimes are bowling, skating, dancing, and hiking. I would like to have some pen pards to write to, so come on, give a guy a chance, amigos.

THOMAS A. SCOTT,
Box 144,
Glen Alpine, N. C.

Letters and snapshots are welcome.

Dear Bill:

I have read quite a few copies of WESTERN TRAILS and think the stories are great. I would like very much to have some pen pals.

I am fourteen years of age, and have brown hair and eyes. My weight is 102 pounds, and I'm five feet, one inch tall. I will exchange snapshots and letters with everyone who writes to me. I like movies, square dancing, tennis, basketball, and writing letters.

Come on, pen pards, write a lonely girl a few lines.

Yours truly,

FAYE ROGERS
East End Blvd.
R. D. 1
Wilkes-Barre, Pa.

From Indiana comes this plea.

Dear Bill:

I've been reading WESTERN TRAILS for a long time and would like it very much if you would put my name on the pen pal page.

I am eighteen years old, have slate-gray eyes and dark copper hair. I am five feet two, and weigh 129 pounds. I like to sing, dance, and love horses.

Please, boys and girls, write to me. I will answer all letters promptly and exchange snapshots.

VIOLET HASSLER
625 North Fifth St.
Terre Haute, Ind.

An' listen, folks, don't forget to send in your ballots. Here's the ballot. Just mark "1" — "2" — "3" — "4" — an' so on, in the order of your likin'.

Adios, amigos—till next time.

Tophand Author's Ballot

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BARRY GARDNER *Lair of the Laughing Lobo*	

Name .....
Address .....

For the protection of our readers, WESTERN TRAILS reserves the right to open all Pen Pard mail passing through our hands.

Deputy Johnny Parr had served the law well, until a killer quest flung him into the . . .

Lair of the Laughing Lobo

By Barry Gardner

AS JOHNNY PARR, deputy sheriff, crouched there in the jackpine thicket, staring warily at the dilapidated cabin in the small clearing before him, there seemed to be no sound or movement in all the Blackfoot Hills. Even the wind had died away, and it was stiflingly hot.

The lanky, red-haired deputy had been huddled there in the thicket for the last half hour, watching the cabin. He couldn't afford to make a mistake, because if he did it very probably would be his last. For he knew now what he had only suspected before—that "Lobo" Leech was a thieving, cold-blooded killer.

Lobo Leech was a "wolfer" whom the Blackfoot Valley ranchers had hired six months ago to clean out the packs of huge, ravenous beasts which almost

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nightly swept down out of the hills in ruinous forays that were rapidly depleting their herds. From the first Johnny Parr had disliked and distrusted the slab-bodied, pale-eyed wolf hunter, even though he was forced to admit that Leech knew his business. Although sullen and unsociable at all times, when he was drinking—which was most of the time—the wolfer was quarrelsome and arrogant.

Once, in town, it had been Johnny's task to arrest and jail Leech for wrecking a saloon. Leech had resisted and had been so nasty about it that Johnny Parr had taken his gun away from him and given him a beating with his fists. The wolfer had snarlingly promised to get even.

Johnny stirred impatiently. Still there was no sign of life about this old abandoned cabin that Lobo Leech had appropriated for his own use. The near-by brush corral was empty. Perhaps Leech was somewhere out among the canyons and ragged walls that hemmed the place, looking at some of his wolf snares or hiding the stage loot. In that case he probably would soon return.

Johnny Parr glanced at the sun, low over the timbered ridges, then got to his feet. Obviously, if the wolfer had been about the cabin he would have shown himself before now. The lanky deputy stepped boldly but warily into the open and went toward the cabin.

Nothing happened. He went slowly forward, hand on gun butt, smoky blue eyes alert for sound or movement. Pausing before the half-opened doorway he peered into the cabin's shadowy interior. He could see an untidy jumble of traps and blankets and other gear piled on the floor. The room had an unpleasant smell.

THE best place to be when Leech returned, Johnny decided, was inside the cabin. He stepped quickly through the doorway—and suddenly flung his sinewy body desperately aside.

He glimpsed Lobo Leech's slab-bodied figure, lunging out from behind the half-opened door, his dark, evil face, the

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clubbed gun in his hand. With bitter despair Johnny realized that he had walked into a trap. He tried wildly to dodge the gun that was smashing at his head, to draw his own .45, knowing that he could do neither.

The gun barrel crashed against his head. The room seemed to explode redly before his eyes. Then Johnny knew he was on the floor. He didn't lose consciousness, but it was a full minute before the room stopped spinning and he could sit up.

Lobo Leech had his gun. The wolfer stood over him, a sneering, wicked grin on his thin lips.

"I never saw a badge-toter that wasn't dumb," he said. "I saw you when you was half a mile away, crossin' a ridge. I could look through a crack and see you out there in the thicket. It took you a long time to decide to move. Time or two I nearly made up my mind to blast you."

Johnny's head ached savagely and blood was trickling down over his face. He got slowly, unsteadily to his feet.

"Why didn't you?" he asked. "That would have been about your stripe."

"I would have, if it'd been that moss-horn sheriff instead of you. But I've got other plans for you, redhead."

"Such as what?"

"You'll find out, soon enough! What you pokin' about up here for, anyway?"

Johnny Parr said levelly, "You know the answer to that, Leech. Stickin' up the stage over in Mustang Canyon this mornin' was bad enough, without killin' the driver in cold blood."

Leech's pale eyes narrowed coldly.

"So that's it!" he purred. "I thought I had my face covered so nobody'd recognize me—"

"Nobody recognized you. But soon as the stage got into town with the dead driver, I thought of you. You ain't had me fooled much, Leech. The rottenness inside you shows in your eyes. I suspect-

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ed you of bein' behind some of the other robberies that've been pulled in the valley the last few months, and I'm more certain than ever of it now."

"Which won't help you any now," Leech sneered. "Sure, I've pulled some stickups. Killin' wolves is just a sideline with me. But you still ain't explained how you cottoned onto it bein' me that stuck up the stage this mornin'."

"Simple—I trailed you here, from Mustang Canyon. You done a pretty good job of coverin' your tracks, but not good enough. Why'd you murder the driver?"

"He talked too much!" Lobo Leech snarled in a sudden burst of rage. "I told him to shut up and he didn't do it. Well, you bein' such a good tracker is just your hard luck." He stooped and took a length of rope from the floor. "Put your hands behind you!"

Johnny Parr hesitated, measuring his chances—and bitterly decided that he had none. He knew that Lobo Leech would kill him without conscience if he made a crooked move.

He placed his hands behind him and Leech quickly bound his wrists together, tightening the rope with a vicious tug.

"Now what?" Johnny asked calmly.

"Guess!" jeered the wolfer. "Remember what I said after you caught me drunk down in Timberlake and beat me up?"

"You said you'd get even. If you aim to kill me, why not get it over with?"

"Because I aim to have me some fun first! Even if I didn't hate your insides, you know too much to live." He jiggled the gun muzzle. "Get outside!"

AGAIN the red-haired deputy obeyed. He had no idea what lay ahead, but the gloating, feral light in Leech's chalky eyes made his flesh crawl.

The sun was almost touching the timbered hills now, streaking the sky with red as if huge, bloody fingers had been dragged across it. Johnny glanced over his shoulder. Leech had followed him from the cabin, at a safe distance, warily vigilant. He knew he could expect no help. Sheriff Rayburn had been

out of town, and he had taken the stage bandit's trail alone.

Leech gestured with the gun muzzle. "Lead out—and you'd better not try any tricks!"

Puzzled, but scorning to ask further questions, Johnny Parr strode in the direction his captor had indicated. Leech had taken a long rope from a corral post and now carried it in his hand. They threaded their way through a dense, thorny thicket and before them lay a wild jumble of cliffs and huge boulders. A moment later, three hundred yards from the cabin, they paused at the edge of a precipice.

Johnny Parr looked puzzledly about. He had never seen wilder, rougher country. Wolf country. Grinning, Leech gestured toward the rim of the cliff on which they stood.

Below them lay a tiny, almost circular valley—or pit—that was no more than a hundred yards across at its widest. It was as if a giant shovel had scooped a hole in the rocky earth. The pit was entirely hemmed by sheer granite walls, from twenty to fifty feet in height. The floor of the place was covered with boulders and underbrush, and a cottonwood tree.

At one end of the pit, where it narrowed to a few feet and where apparently there had once been an outlet, was a twenty-foot-high pile of boulders as sheer as the walls themselves.

Lobo Leech had been tying one end of the rope to the bole of a pine back a few feet from the cliff edge. Now he straightened, grinning maliciously.

"My private jail, kid. No roof or bars, but down there a man'd be a lot more of a prisoner than he would in that two-bit jail of yours down in Timberlake."

"What's the idea?" Johnny asked stiffly. "Aim to put me down there and watch me starve to death?"

"Maybe I do. It'd take you a long time to starve, wouldn't it? Give you time to think about the way you mistreated me. I'm fixin' to untie you now, but don't get any funny ideas!"

Johnny was thinking hard as Leech

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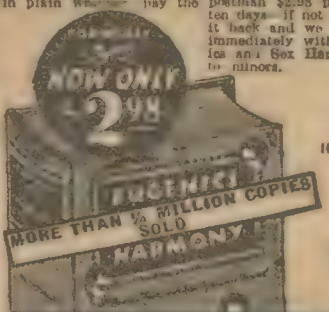

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untied his hands. If the wolfer meant to put him in that hole and . . . a lot could happen before he starved to death. He glanced with narrowed eyes down into the pit. Leech was no fool. There was something else to this, something he hadn't suspected. Leech stepped back, gun in hand.

"Now shinny down that rope," he ordered.

Johnny Parr hesitated briefly, glancing again over the precipice and then back at Leech. Leech was still grinning, but there was a cold, deadly light in his eyes. Johnny took hold of the rope, one end of which dangled over the cliff edge. He didn't know what awaited him below, but certain death was here on the rim if he didn't obey.

He slid over the cliff edge and started lowering himself into the pit.

The cottonwood tree he had noticed before, its roots thirty feet from the cliff base, was a tall one. Its lower branches scraped against the cliffside, while its topmost branches extended a good ten feet above the forty-foot wall. These branches, however, were a good twenty feet from the cliff top—too far for even a cougar to leap.

As Johnny's feet touched the floor of the pit, he released the rope. Instantly, Leech jerked the rope upward, and his jeering chuckle came down to the deputy.

JOHNNY PARR turned slowly, facing the pit. Again he had that feeling of something amiss, something unknown. The sun was below the ridges now, and shadows were beginning to gather in the pit. Later, silvery light from the moon high in the sky would cascade into the hole, but now the shadows took on the shapes of slinking, sinister figures.

"You couldn't climb them walls, not in a year," Lobo Leech said from above. "So no use tryin'. And that pile of rock down yonder—you can't climb over that, either. Until I bottled it up with dynamite two weeks ago, there was a narrow outlet between two walls there. Know why I done it?"

Johnny didn't answer. His eyes were

probing the pit. He knew that his imagination probably accounted for those flitting shapes. But the smell in his nostrils wasn't imagination; it was an evil, animal smell.

"Lot of wolves in these hills," Leech was saying, "big, hungry brutes. I get a fifty-dollar bounty apiece for their pelts. Well, when I saw this place it gave me an idea for a cleanup. One night, two weeks ago, I killed a steer and tossed it down there. Like I'd expected, it brought the wolves. I'd already placed my dynamite at the entrance, and when there was a big bunch inside I set it off. Then I had 'em. They couldn't get out, any more than you can, lawdog!"

Johnny Parr placed his back to the wall. Now he knew, and suddenly he wished that he had risked almost certain death and jumped Lobo Leech while he had the chance. He was in this pit with a pack of starved wolves!

"Twenty-eight in all!" Leech's chuckle sounded like the rattle of dry bones. "Two weeks since they've had a bite to eat, so they're powerful hungry. Daytime, they hole up in a cave over yonder at the foot of the wall. It's gettin' dark now, though!"

Johnny strained his eyes toward the far side of the pit. And now he knew that his eyes weren't playing tricks on him. Huge, gaunt, gray shapes were skulking among the boulders and underbrush over there. They were coming toward him.

Momentary panic rose wild and icy inside the lanky deputy. He knew that, ordinarily, wolves would not attack a man even at night. But these beasts were starving. They wouldn't hesitate to attack savagely anything that offered food.

Frantically, his eyes probed the immediate vicinity, hoping desperately to find a spot that would afford even momentary safety. High on the cliffsides he could see several narrow ledges, but they were too high to offer any hope of reaching them. Nearer the ground, the walls were sheer and smooth.

The savage gray beasts were swiftly closing in on him. He could see the greenish fire of their eyes, hear the stealthy

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pad of their feet in the shadows. Otherwise they kept a deadly sinister silence.

"For two weeks I've been promisin' my pets meat," Leech jeered from the rim. "Now they've got it, unless you can think of a way out, lawdog."

THE wolves were close now. Johnny could smell them, see them, hear the scrape of their claws over the rocks. They had scented him, were about to attack!

Johnny Parr whirled, lunged toward the cottonwood tree thirty feet away. He heard the rushing thud of many padded feet behind him, and snarling gray animal figures raced out of the shadows.

The lowest branch of the cottonwood was ten feet from the ground. Desperately, with all his strength, Johnny Parr leaped upward. His fingers grasped the limb, and he swung his muscular body upward.

He was none too soon. Shadowy forms hurtled through the air with fierce, throaty snarls, so close that he could feel the air their lunging bodies stirred, their fangs slashing wickedly at the spot where he had been seconds before. With enraged snarls the baffled wolves whirled and leaped upward at him, their slavering jaws snapping and clashing.

Shaken, pale-faced at his narrow escape, Johnny climbed to a higher limb.

"So you made it," Leech called mockingly. "I kind of hoped you would. That'll make my fun last longer. But if you think bein' in that tree helps you any, think ag'in!"

Johnny spat, "Leech, you thievin', murderin' buzzard, you ain't fit to live! If I could—"

At the wolfer's taunting laugh, Johnny checked his blazing anger. That was what Leech wanted—revenge. He wanted to hear the man who had humiliated him beg and whine before he died.

The shadows were deepening in the pit. But in the beginning moonlight Johnny could see the gaunt wolves as they walked in stiff-legged circles below the tree and glared hungrily up at him. He could hear their baffled, eager whines.

He knew that Lobo Leech had told the

truth. While he was safe from the ravenous beasts so long as he stayed in the tree, he couldn't remain there forever. And, the instant he touched the ground, the wolves would tear him to shreds.

An hour passed . . . two hours. Still the wolves stalked restlessly below the tree, glaring upward with their fiery but heatless eyes at him. Still Lobo Leech remained there on the clifftop, only a few yards away, jeering, taunting, mocking.

"Stay there as long as you like," he taunted. "I got plenty time. When I get tired waitin' I can just shoot you and watch you fall. Then my pets will eat. I reckon now you wish you'd never laid a hand on Lobo Leech, don't you?"

Johnny said nothing. He tried to close his ears to Leech's jibes, and all the time his eyes and brain were busy. Even if he could leave the tree, he couldn't climb the walls. For the hundredth time, his eyes explored the cliffside, only a few feet from the tip of the low branch on which he perched.

He could jump from the limb to the wall. But here the wall was smooth, sheer. Higher up, there were ledges, but they were on a level with the upper branches and the distance between them was too hopelessly great for an attempted leap. If he tried it, and missed . . .

IT WAS, Johnny reasoned, after midnight now. Leech's occasional taunts sounded sleepy. But the wolves seemed tireless.

Leech yawned. "I'm goin' to the cabin and get some blankets now. I'll be back, and I'll sleep right here. Not that I'm scared you'll get away. I just want to make shore I don't miss anything if you go to sleep and tumble out of that tree!"

Johnny heard Leech's footsteps receding toward the cabin. But within ten minutes the wolf hunter was back, with an armful of blankets. Johnny could see him plainly in the moonlight as he spread the blankets on the ground on the very edge of the wall.

Before lying down, Leech tossed a chunk of driftwood over the rim and laughed evilly as a dozen of the starved

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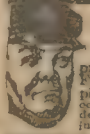

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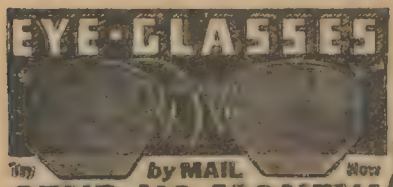

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wolves instantly pounced upon it and ripped at it with their fangs. Their snarling and clawing made a terrific uproar.

"That's what'll happen to you, tin-star, when you tumble out of that tree," jeered the wolfer. "If I'm asleep, it'll wake me up in time to see the fun."

Johnny Parr shivered, but remained silent.

Leech yawned again, lay down on the blankets. Ten minutes later Johnny heard his raucous snores. Stealthily, then, the deputy started climbing higher in the tree. The lower branches, although they touched the smooth wall, offered no hope. And while these limbs sprouted almost straight outward from the tree trunk, the topmost branches jutted almost straight upward.

It was on these slender, swaying branches that Johnny Parr had pinned his slim hopes. He kept on climbing until he was perched almost in the very tiptop of the cottonwood, on a limb that was on the side of the tree nearest the cliff. The branch swayed sickeningly under his weight, and his stomach turned over as he looked downward fifty feet to where the wolves milled restlessly.

He was now several feet above the cliff edge, and a good twenty feet away from it. He could see Lobo Leech sprawled on his blankets and hear his snores. The wind had risen and whispered among the walls, swaying the slender limb back and forth like an upside-down pendulum.

Crouched there in the treetop, Johnny Parr remembered his boyhood which had been spent roaming the creek bottomlands of a wooded valley. His father had taught him how, when he wanted to cross a narrow stream and there was no footlog, to climb to the top of a sapling near the water's edge; to swing his body outward so that the sapling bent and measured its length across the creek, letting him drop high and dry on the far bank.

Calculatingly, he studied the cliff edge and knew that he couldn't make it. But, ten feet below the rim, there was a narrow ledge, and above the ledge were crevices and knobs of rock.

Knowing it was his only chance, Johnny took a firm grip on the slender branch above his head and flung his body toward the cliff. The limb creaked, swayed violently, and swayed outward. Johnny hurtled through the air so swiftly that for an instant he thought the limb had broken and was catapulting him to the earth where the wolves had set up an eager snarling and whining.

He saw the cliff edge flash past him. Then his feet hit the rock ledge with a jolt. The limb bent sickeningly, cracked. Johnny broke away from it and clawed frantically at the face of the wall. One foot slid off the ledge.

Then his fingers slid into a crevice and held. Weak, sweating, he pulled himself onto the ledge. He huddled there a moment, gasping for breath, listening, fearful that the noise had awakened Leech. But the wolfer was still snoring raggedly, above and several yards to his right.

STEALTHILY, inch by inch, Johnny Parr started the upward climb. It took him several minutes to climb the ten feet to the rim. He hung a moment with elbows hooked over the cliff edge, sweat running into his eyes, knowing that a blunder now would prove instantly fatal.

The wolves below, excited at seeing their prey escaping, were snarling and slashing at each other. Lobo Leech lay on his back twenty feet away, mouth open, still snoring.

Fearful that the din below would awaken Leech, Johnny climbed quickly onto the rim. As he did so his foot dislodged a slab of rock the size of his head. The rock bounced down the cliffside, dislodging other rocks and loose shale, creating a miniature landslide that clattered and crashed down into the pit.

Leech's snores chopped off abruptly. He sat up, muttering sleepily, feeling on the blanket beside him for his gun.

Swearing bitterly, Johnny Parr vaulted over the rim and lunged at the killer. Leech, on his knees, gave a startled yell and jerked up the gun.

Johnny smashed into him, kicking at

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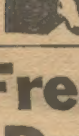

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his gun-hand. The gun roared, blazed, and Johnny felt the burn of the bullet across his thigh. But he had kicked the gun from Leech's hand, and it went skittering over the rocky earth and over the cliff edge.

Johnny's hurtling body had smashed Leech to the ground, going down with him. Leech rolled over, reared to his feet, cursing wickedly. But Johnny was already up, and he ran at the rawboned killer, hammering with his fists at Leech's dark snarling face. Leech brought a knee viciously up into Johnny's stomach.

Pain and nausea flowed through the deputy, almost blinding him.

As through a red fog he saw Lobo Leech braced to lunge at him. He saw the long-bladed knife in Leech's hand.

"Now I've got you, lawdog!" Leech said harshly. "I don't savvy how you got outa that hole, but it won't help you any."

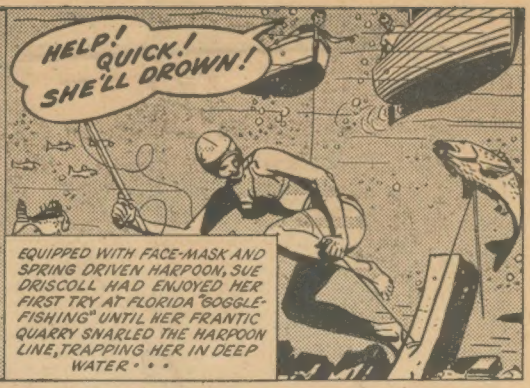
With an animal snarl in his throat, he lunged at Johnny Parr, the knife upraised. Desperately, the deputy sent his body curveting to one side. He felt the rush of Leech's hurtling body past him, felt the slash of the knife through his shirt sleeve. He heard the wolfer's startled, terrified scream. And then, where Lobo Leech had been a second before, there was nothing.

Leech, in his savage eagerness to kill Johnny Parr, hadn't noticed that the deputy was standing on the very edge of the precipice. Unable to check his wild charge, as Johnny lurched aside, he had plunged over the rim!

Sprawled there on the ground, Johnny heard the crash of Leech's body as it hit the lower limbs of the cottonwood and sifted through, the soft thud as it hit the floor of the pit. And then he heard other sounds that made him even sicker: the wicked snarling of starved wolves.

Johnny Parr got to his feet and reeled away from the cliff edge. When he was far enough away so that he couldn't hear the noisome sounds from the pit, he stopped and gulped fresh, clean air into his lungs. He stood there a long while, seeing for the first time the wholesome beauty of this moonlit night.

JIM DIVED INTO TROUBLE BUT THEN...



EQUIPPED WITH FACE-MASK AND SPRING DRIVEN HARPOON, SUE DRISCOLL HAD ENJOYED HER FIRST TRY AT FLORIDA "GOGGLE-FISHING" UNTIL HER FRANTIC QUARRY SNARLED THE HARPOON LINE, TRAPPING HER IN DEEP WATER...

..AND AFTER FOUR YEARS IN THE ARMY, I'M UNDECIDED ABOUT RETURNING TO WAYBURN U.
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